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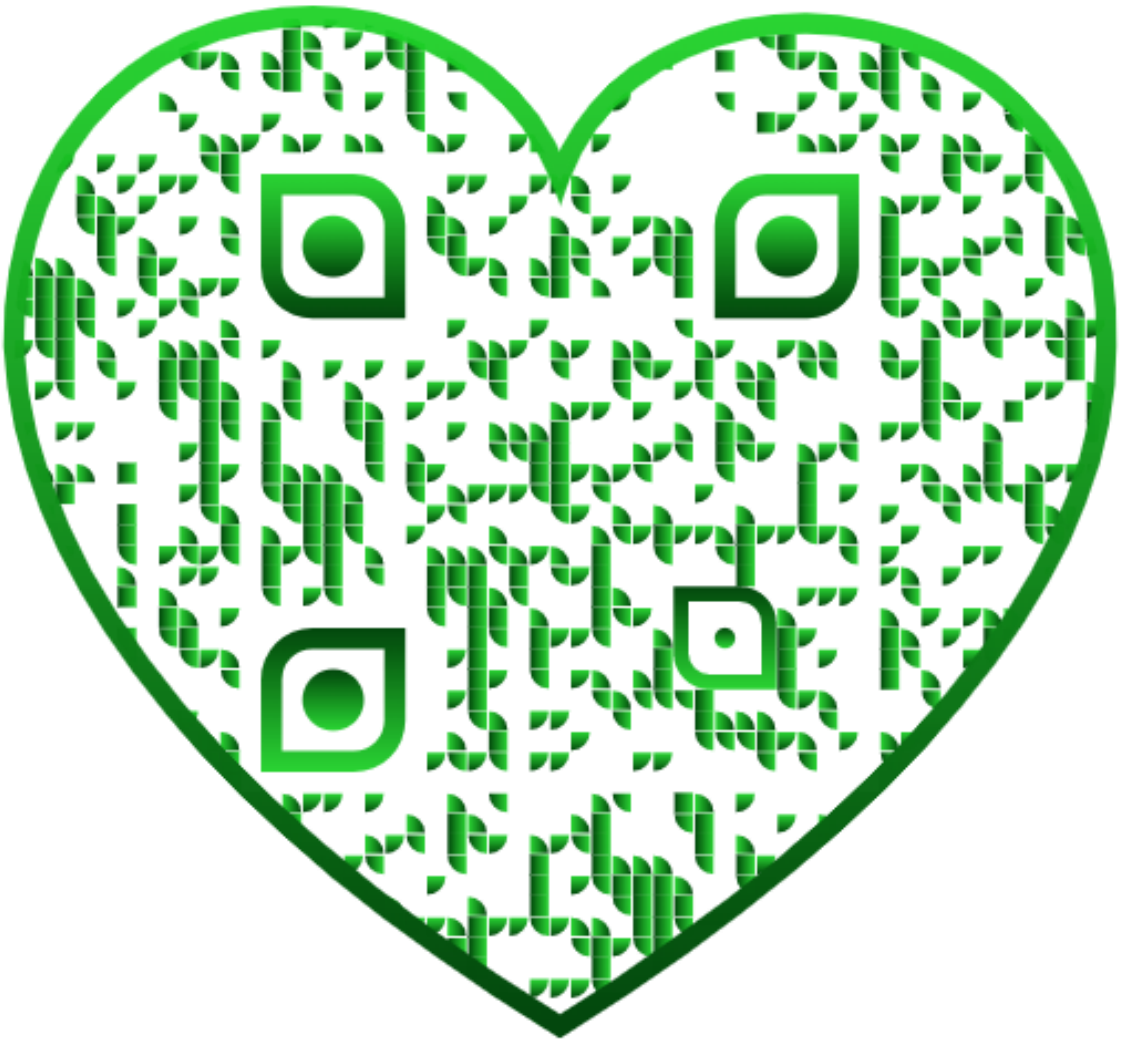

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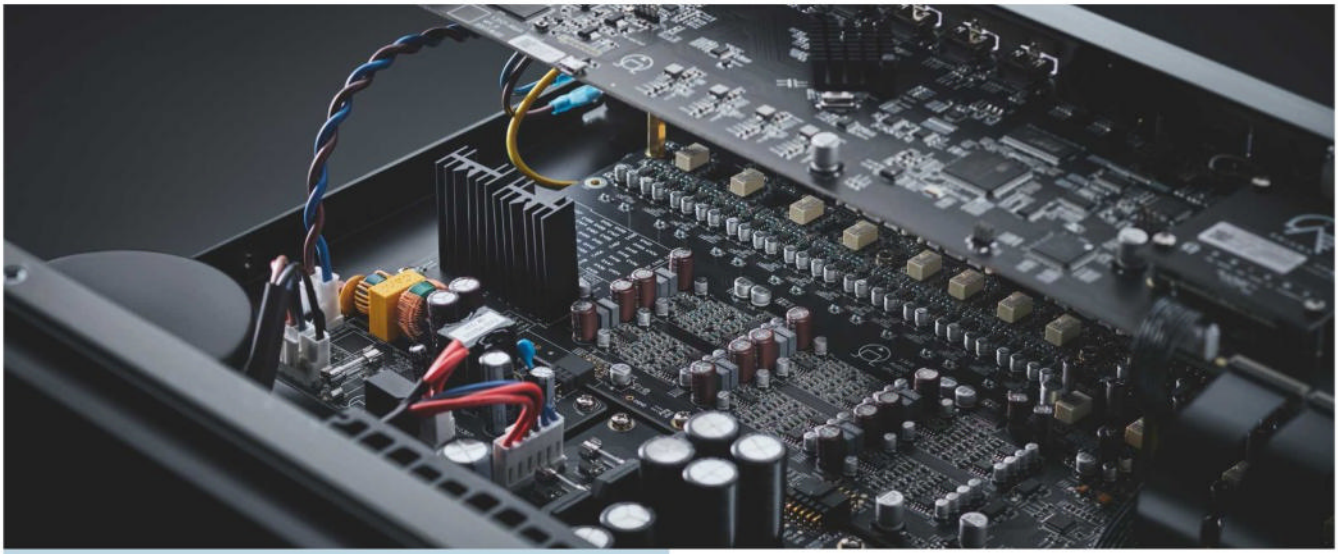

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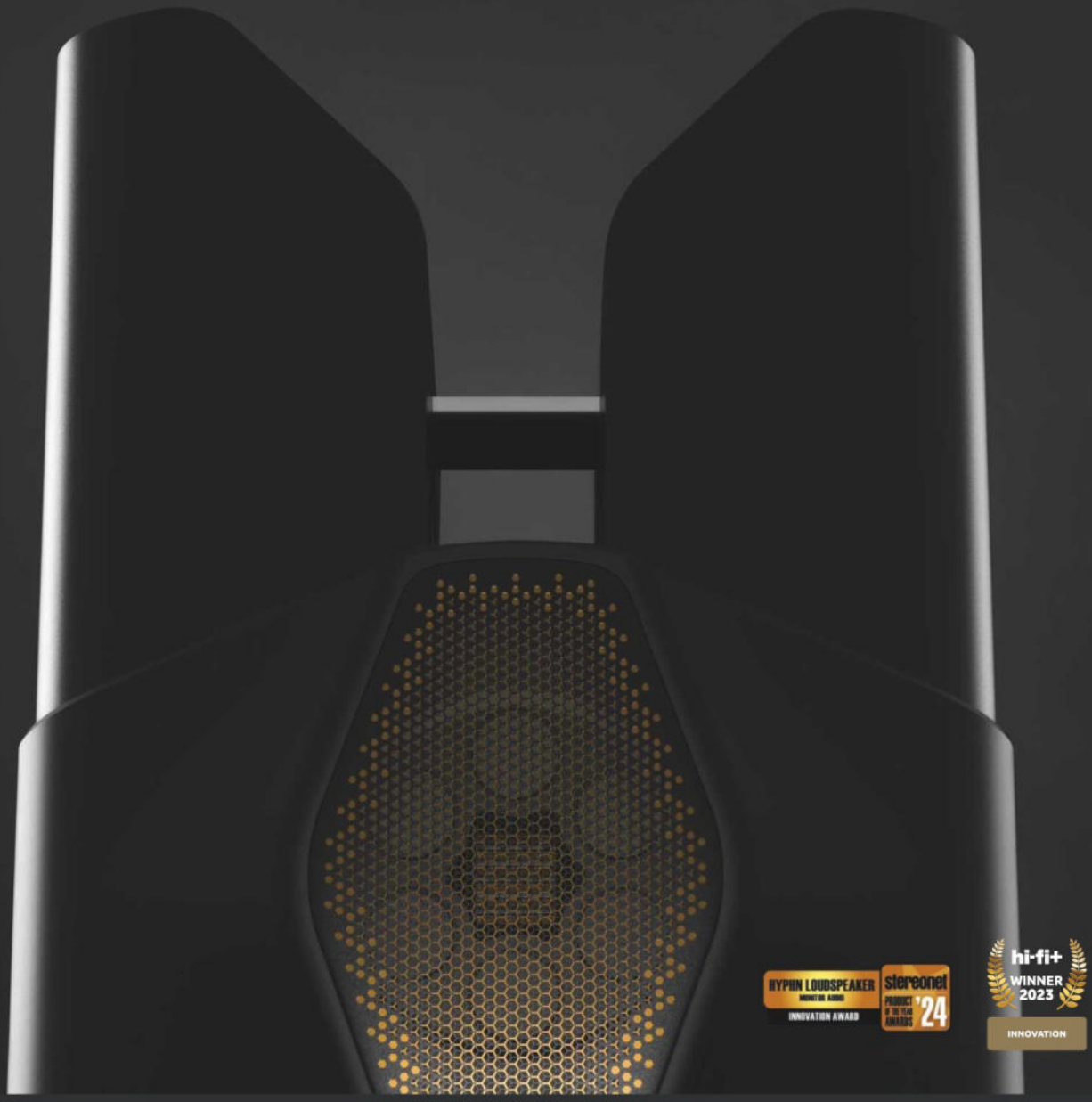

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hi-fi+ - August 2023

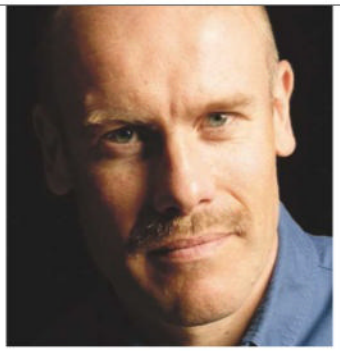
Explore more

RIGHT: Able to trace its lineage back to 1949, Quad's Revela 1 ribbon tweeter has evolved! See p58

BELOW: Not to scale, and Canor's KT88-equipped Virtus I2 integrated amplifier lights up the music on p62

MUSIC: Our Vinyl Icon is a soprano on a mission, launching herself with *Joan Baez Vol. 1* (p82), while Steve Sutherland launches the first DJ astronaut as Fatboy Slim's second LP returns on 180g (p80)

RIGHT: *HFN* is the UK's representative of EISA's Hi-Fi Expert Group. Editor Paul Miller took over as EISA's President in June 2016 and was re-elected in 2021



What does 'flagship' mean to you? Different things to different eras, and nationalities, of audiophiles I'd suspect. For aficionados in the '50s there was no greater aspirational buy than Quad's seminal ESL-57 electrostatic loudspeaker. When Ralph West explored the design in *HFN* Nov '57, he described it in understated tones as 'an excellent domestic speaker'. That's 'speaker' in the singular because at £52 *each* they were originally sold into mono set-ups.

The US had its own national flagbearers of course, albeit hitting its stride through the 1960s and '70s with the Infinity Systems SS-1 electrostatic/dynamic hybrid, followed up by the legendary IRS V and iconic Beveridge 2SW, a 6ft electrostatic column. Wilson Audio's Modular Monitor system (WAMM) was unveiled at CES in 1982 but with an asking price of some $30k it's fair to say that the 'high-end', with Threshold, McIntosh and Krell amplifiers and Apogee full-range ribbons before it, had well and truly arrived.

At the same time, 'flagship' ranges imported from Japan represented something different – these were cost-no-object separates that brought the promise, or at least the suggestion, of trickledown before we had even heard of the term. Sony, Trio, Technics, Pioneer and many others would stride the audio landscape, offering everything from 'rack systems' to the pinnacles of over-engineered excellence.

Before the scourge of hairshirt minimalism descended on UK hi-fi, these Japanese range-toppers represented an era when top-end audio was also *stylish*. Nowadays, we audiophiles are again appreciating that this is not necessarily a contradiction!

> 'With an asking price of some $30k... the high-end had arrived'

With all this talk of flagships, and brands that span the affordable to 'you must be kidding', turn to p20 for news of Sonus faber's four-column (two floorstanders and two subs) Suprema speaker system. If £695k is a tad steep, then its £2999 Lumina V Amator is fine consolation [see p70].

PAUL MILLER GROUP EDITOR

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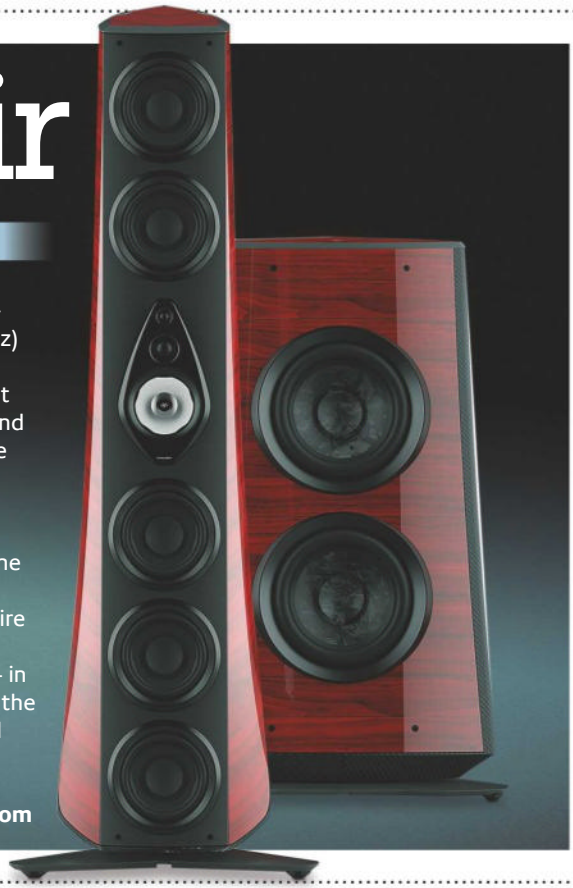
SONUS FABER'S FLAGSHIP SYSTEM PARTNERS FLOORSTANDERS AND SUBS



Comfortably ranged above Sonus faber's Lumina Amator series [p70], the Suprema is the Italian manufacturer's new flagship design, and comprises two floorstanders, one (or two) subwoofers and an outboard crossover unit.

Launched to mark Sonus faber's 40th anniversary, the system – in its '2.2' dual subwoofer guise – is priced at £695,000, while a Suprema 2.1 option is £625,000. Both are available built to order in graphite, red, wenge or walnut finishes, with the towers boasting a Poltrona Frau leather front panel.

Each Suprema floorstander features ten drivers in a 4.5-way configuration. The central 'Voice of Sonus faber' array features a newly engineered 165mm midrange, 38mm tweeter and 20mm super-tweeter, and is flanked top and bottom by a total of five 200mm bass drivers, one a 'link mid-woofer' operating to a higher (430Hz) crossover point. Additionally, at the rear of each 1.9m-tall, 110kg cabinet are rear-radiating tweeter (28mm) and midrange (120mm) units to 'improve staging and dispersion'.

Sonus faber's partnering, sealed-cabinet subwoofers feature two front-facing 380mm carbon fibre cone bass drivers, and are rated down to 16Hz. Passive designs, they will require external amplification – Sonus faber suggests 500W to 2kW is desirable – in addition to system configuration via the Suprema's dual-mono, fully balanced active/passive crossover.

Sonus faber SpA, Vicenza, Italy, 01592 744710; www.sonusfaber.com

Three's company

TOWERING 2000W AMP FROM MCINTOSH

In more 'anniversary' news, McIntosh has announced a new monoblock power amplifier in honour of its 75th birthday – albeit one in three parts. A successor to the US company's 2005-era MC2KW, the £59,995 MC2.1KW again claims a 2000W power output (despite the model name), with its 'triple-chassis' design incorporating an Autoformer output module featuring 8/4/2ohm taps, and two 1kW power modules – bi- and tri-wiring is supported. Among the claimed upgrades are larger capacitors, improved component/circuit design, and a new LED display. The first 75 units produced will feature special edition badging and engraved handles.

McIntosh Labs, Binghamton, NY, USA, 01592 744710; www.mcintoshlabs.com

HI-FI NEWS' NUGGETS

PS AUDIO DAC UPDATE

New 'Mount Massive' firmware for the DirectStream DAC MK2 (£7999) from PS Audio is available that the US brand claims offers drastic reductions in audible (–10dB) and ultrasonic (–30dB) noise by redesigning the buffer on its 'Digital Lens'. This follows *HFN*'s independent lab measurements [*HFN* Jun '23] that revealed PS Audio's second-generation flagship DAC/preamp, which is based around a custom FPGA solution rather than 'off-the-shelf' DAC chips, had higher distortion, higher ultrasonic noise and a poorer S/N ratio than its predecessor.

The revamped 'v3.1.0 OS' is offered free from the download hub on PS Audio's website. Alternatively, USB drives pre-installed with the firmware update are available from PS Audio dealers. Says company CEO Paul McGowan: 'This is the single biggest upgrade I have ever heard'. Naturally, *HFN* will be running its unique benchmark tests on the updated DirectStream DAC MK2 in an upcoming issue. *www.psaudio.com*

Flower power

HIFI ROSE EXPANDS INTEGRATED AMP SERIES

Trickled down from the RA180 integrated amp [*HFN* Jul '22], HiFi Rose's RA280 eases back slightly on the 'steampunk' styling but retains the GaN (gallium nitride) transistor-based Class D amplification, here suggested to deliver 2x250W/8ohm from its dual mono architecture. Again an all-analogue design (the Korean company sells an extensive range of outboard DAC/streamers), the RA280's connections comprise balanced and unbalanced (x3) line-level inputs, MM phono, subwoofer pre-out and trigger in/out. VU meters and bypassable preamp tone controls take centre-stage on its front panel, between source select and volume, while under the bonnet a custom-made silicon carbide FET-based PSU promises 'high voltage and high heat resistance'. Available in black or silver, and shipped with a volume/mute/power remote, the RA280 is ticketed at £2999.

HiFi Rose (Citech Co.), Seoul, South Korea, 01235 511166; www.eng.hifirose.com

Living the high LIFES

LUXMAN RE-IMAGINES ITS PREMIUM ONE-BOX AMPLIFIER

Cheekily described by Luxman as a 'one-body separate', the £11,000 L-509Z is the Japanese brand's new top-of-the-range integrated amplifier, and an evolution of the L-509X [*HFN* Jan '18]. Inside its 193mm-high, 29.4kg 'blaster white' chassis is a three-stage, push-pull Darlington circuit delivering a claimed 2x120W/8ohm, with Luxman's LIFES feedback engine deployed in both preamp and power amp stages for the first time. Also proprietary is the amp's LECUA-EX electronic volume control.

The L-509Z, which follows hot on the heels of Luxman's similarly priced PD-191A turntable [*HFN* Feb '23], has inputs for a newly developed MM/MC phono stage, in addition to two balanced XLR and four RCA line-level connections. As the amplifier is able to be run in 'Separate' mode, there are also main-in and pre-out terminals for use when bypassing its preamp or power stages, respectively. A/B speaker connections are offered, plus 4.4mm and 6.35mm headphone outputs, while the front fascia also carries bass/middle/treble tone controls, analogue VU meters, and a red LED volume display. **Luxman Corp., Japan, 01480 447700; www.luxman.com**

Head-fi from Electromod

VIOLECTRIC RANGE FROM GERMANY COVERS ALL THE BASES

Thanks to recent distribution through Electromod, hardware from German desktop audio specialist Violectric is now available in the UK. Key products include the £1060 HPA V222 headphone amplifier, the £1230 HPA V226 DAC/headphone amp, and £3315 flagship DHA V590² PRO DAC/headphone amp. All are 'true symmetrical' designs based on Violectric's proprietary '50V' gain stages and sport balanced 4-pin XLR and single-ended 6.35mm outputs (the V222 and V226 also have balanced 4.4mm Pentaconn outputs).

Rated outputs are 3.5W/50ohm, 3.5W/100ohm and 6.4W/50ohm, respectively, with adjustable (±18dB) gain for fine-tuning. The V222 and V226 are fitted with Alps RK 27 volume pots while the V590² PRO has a 256-step attenuator.

Violectric, formed in 2009, is the consumer hi-fi division of Lake People Electronic, and boasts a product range encompassing headphone amplifiers, phono/analogue preamps, and AD/DA converters. **Violectric, Konstanz, Germany, 01494 956558; www.violectric.de**

Magnat goes compact

AFFORDABLE TWO-WAY SPEAKERS FOR SMALL-ROOM SET-UPS

A genuine bookshelf speaker measuring just 135mm wide, the Signature Edelstein from Magnat sells for £949 in satin black or satin white. Its 115mm ceramic/magnesium/aluminium sandwich cone bass/mid driver partners a 25mm fabric dome tweeter, the latter mounted in a shallow waveguide cut into the speaker's aluminium front baffle. Rear-porting contributes to a rated 45Hz (–6dB) low-end reach, while a claimed 90dB sensitivity and '4-8ohm' impedance suggests it'll be an easy 'amp partner'. Base plates, with layers of acrylic and aluminium, are fitted to the MDF cabinets to assist in vibration control. **Magnat, Germany, 01235 511 166; www.magnat.de**

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Upcoming Events

INTERNATIONAL DATES FOR YOUR HI-FI DIARY

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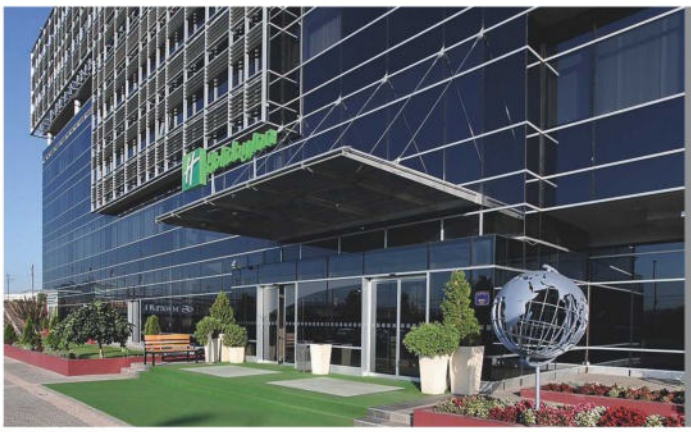
03 MAR	Spring Audio Jumble 2024, The Angel Leisure Centre, Tonbridge, Kent; *www.audiojumble.co.uk*
09-12 MAY	High End, Munich, Germany; *www.highendsociety.de*
22-23 JUN	North West Audio Show, Cranage Hall (De Vere Cranage Estate), Cheshire; *http://audioshow.co.uk*
21-22 SEP	The UK Hi-Fi Show *Live*, Ascot Racecourse Grandstand, Ascot Berkshire SL5 7JX; *www.hifishowlive.com*

Hi-Files Show '23, Belgrade

Words & Pictures: **Ljubiša Miodragović**



After first opening its doors back in 2008 the 17th Hi-Files Show once again attracted a record number of audiophiles, drawing visitors not only from Serbia itself but from other countries within the region.

Held on the 7th and 8th of October at the Holiday Inn in New Belgrade, this time the organiser reserved 15 larger rooms in which local distributors were able to demonstrate systems made up of components from a wide range of global big-hitters. There was no shortage of home-grown fare, either, with brands such as MirAudio, Solaja Audio and Tight Sounds Factory able to showcase their latest offerings. All demonstrated an enthusiasm for audio and music that too often surpasses their recognition on the international audio market.

Soulines demonstrated its Kubrick DCX turntable [*HFN* Jul '18] equipped with the 9in unipivot KiVi tonearm it manufactures in-house. The deck sports a 40mm-thick acrylic platter, uses an inverted solid brass/stainless steel bearing and offers speeds of 33.3 and 45rpm. It was connected to Soulines' Loop MM/MC tube preamp while the cartridge used was a Benz Micro Zebra Low. Room treatment came courtesy of a Passive Multivocal Resonator from Germany's HighEndNovum. *www.soulines.com*

One of the event's main attractions could be found in one of the large rooms where high-end distributor 4Audio had assembled a McIntosh system with an MCD600 CD/SACD player hooked up to a C2700 tube preamplifier. The latter offers 16 inputs and uses 12AX7A and 12AT7 valves. Meanwhile, a brace of MC611 monoblocks, each rated at 600W, provided the heft to drive a pair of Sonus faber Amati Homage speakers [*HFN* Aug '23]. Cabling was from AudioQuest. Visitors were also able to explore models from the McIntosh turntable range. *www.mcintoshlabs.com*

Local importer Sretenović showcased this impressive Quad system featuring a pair of ESL-2912 speakers, each using no fewer than six electrostatic panels. The juice came courtesy of the company's Artera monoblocks, rated at 300W into 8ohm, which proved the ideal choice for this third-generation ESL speaker. The rest of the system comprised components from Audio Research and Burmester. *www.quad-hifi.co.uk*

Part of local distributor Ecoform Audio's portfolio, Tight Sounds Factory is a speaker manufacturer hailing from Serbia's second largest city, Novi Sad. Its Model B MKII standmount employs an intriguing mix of a ribbon tweeter with midrange driver mounted onto the baffle while two bass units are housed on the side. The speakers were driven by electronics from another Serbian manufacturer, Solaja Audio from Belgrade, which showcased its Grand Excellence preamplifier and tube-driven SE Tandem power amplifier. *www.audionote.rs; www.solajaaudio.com*

Peter Reinders of PTP Audio has been enhancing Lenco-based turntables in Holland since 2005. His 4mm-thick, laser-cut stainless steel top plates and motor mounts, dubbed the PTP5 and PTP6, are available to update original Lenco decks. This PTP5-equipped model was hooked up to an M-1000 integrated amplifier from Serbian maker MirAudio. *www.ptpaudio.com*

Meet FRANKY and HUMAN, two loudspeakers built by Saša Černe of BIOS Audio, renowned for his work with Teresonic's Lowther driver-based speakers. Both are three-way designs and, despite being stylistically different, claim very similar specifications. These include a frequency range of 30Hz to 32kHz, a nominal impedance of 6ohm and a sensitivity of 88dB. *hajdukdj@gmail.com*

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The Fyne Audio Vintage Twelve loudspeakers feature a 300mm bass/mid driver with a concentric 75mm titanium compression tweeter. They were hooked up to a McIntosh MA12000 integrated amp, rated at 2x350W, with music sourced in turn from a HiFi Rose RS150B streamer and Linn Majik LP12 turntable with Krane tonearm and Adikt MM cartridge. The system also included a Naim NSC 222 streaming network preamp from the New Classic series, which includes a built-in phono stage, plus a Naim NPX 300 outboard power supply. *www.fyneaudio.com*

Among other electronics, Acoustic Invader unveiled a new Class D monoblock called FELON, a pair of which drove Relco Audio's DaVinci II floorstanders. Turntable was a Perpetuum Ebner PE 4040 MKII and phono stage a Zanden Model 1300. The jet on the banner inspired the red controls as designer Zanden Vidić used to be a pilot. *www.acousticinvader.com*

New to the show this year was Dirigent Acoustics, which mainly offers solutions to acoustic, noise control and sound insulation issues. However, loudspeakers are another field of interest for the Belgrade-based company and designer Goran Todorović demonstrated two models – the Hudyn and the Tachyon standmount [pictured]. Both are diminutive designs, so visitors were pleasantly surprised by the sheer scale of sound emanating from such small cabinets. These loudspeakers use a single 'full-range' driver, so their construction is relatively straightforward. *https://dirigent.acoustics.solutions*

This neat set-up was from Teoharov Audio and comprised the company's NetAMPLIFIER and H 1B loudspeakers. The amplifier is a Class D design rated at 2x120W and supports streaming via LAN, Wi-Fi and Bluetooth aptX HD. The two-way loudspeakers, meanwhile, see a 25mm tweeter placed below a 140mm bass/mid unit (both Scan-Speak). It was a simple system, yet it proved to be one of the most musical and entertaining at the show. *www.teoharov.mk*

inakustik

PHYSICS NOT VOODOO

hi-finews EDITOR'S CHOICE

"...if you're thinking of blowing the cobwebs from your set-up, In-akustik has the air!"

NF-204 Micro Air, Editor's Choice, Hi Fi News, April 2022

"There's a lot of hand-made cable here for the money, making it a reliable bet for that first 'big upgrade'."

LS-204 XL Micro Air, Editor's Choice, Hi Fi News, February 2021

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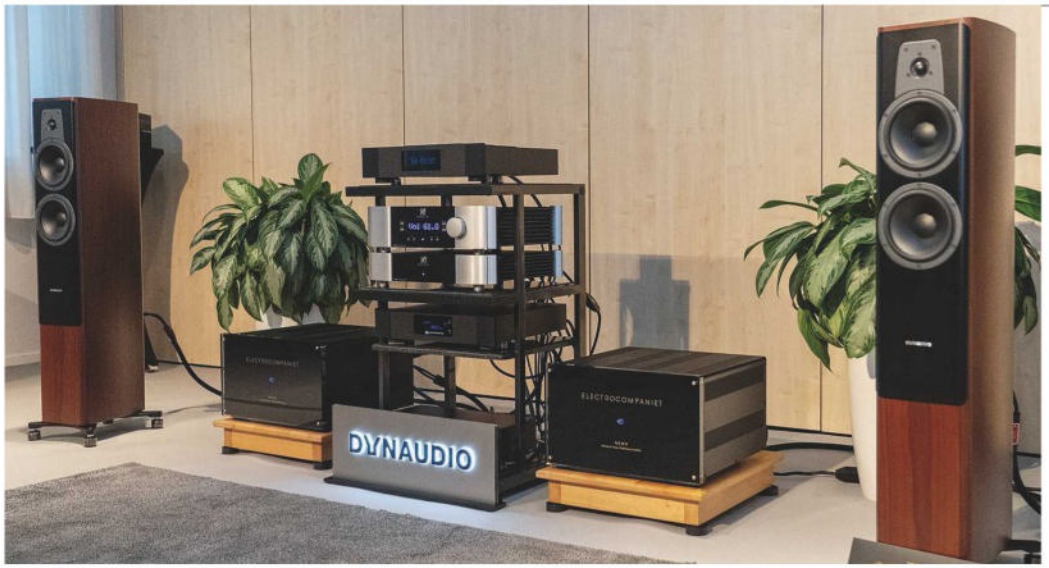

This system was fronted by Dynaudio's Contour 30i speakers, which feature a pair of 180mm bass/mid drivers below a 28mm Esotar 2i tweeter. Electrocompaniet's Nemo AW 600 monoblocks, rated at 600W per channel into 8ohm, provided the power while hooked up to a two-box Simaudio MOON P-8 preamp. Both CD and streaming services were used as sources, the digital section made up entirely of components from Métronome in the form of its Le Player 4 CD transport, DSS network player and Le DAC converter. *www.dynaudio.com*

Said to deliver 300W per channel, the U-280 from Aavik is an integrated amp with a DAC on board. The company's S-280 streamer delivered the music along with the two-box Innuos Statement [*HFN* Jan '20] network-attached device (right). This sports a slot-loading built-in CD ripper sourced from TEAC, plus 4TB of internal storage. *www.audiogroupdenmark.com*

The model Z3 from Børresen is a 102.5cm-tall floorstander with its twin 200mm bass drivers located relatively close to the floor which, says the Danish company, ensures the speaker is 'better integrated acoustically to the room'. Near the top of the cabinet sits a 115mm midrange driver while above this is a planar ribbon-type tweeter, said to work from around 2.5kHz upwards. The bass and mid drivers use a membrane made from a composite of two layers of thin carbon sandwiching a 4mm-thick Nomex honeycomb core. *www.audiogroupdenmark.com*

If there were a prize for the most effort put into one room it would have to go to Velikinac Audio Lab. Acoustic panels behind the system, absorption panels to the sides, while on the floor a beautiful carpet to attenuate ground reflections. The speakers were the three-box horn-loaded Sirius, and due to the fact they weigh 100kg, they come on wheels. They stand 160cm tall, are 60cm deep and 94cm wide. Visitors could also see cables produced by the brand, as well its Tisa and Differo II SE+ speakers. We say hats off to the Velikinac team! *www.velikinacaudiolab.com*

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Although most visitors to the room of distributor Impulse Hi-Fi Audio expected the Hegel H190 [*HFN* Jan '18] integrated or Exposure 3510 [*HFN* Jul '23] and 5010 [*HFN* Nov '18] mono amps to be pumping out the watts, typically the sound poured from the Jadis I-70 integrated (top right of rack). Measuring 400x255x400mm (whd), the I-70 amp is rated at 2x50W and hosts two ECC83, three ECC82 and four KT170 tubes. Cambridge Audio's Edge NQ [*HFN* May '21] and Matrix Audio's Element X2/X-Sabre 3 [*HFN* Apr '22] streaming DACs served up the sounds.
www.jadis-electronics.com

This heady cocktail of audio goodies saw the strapping Coltrane 3 speakers from Marten wired to D'Agostino M400MxV monoblocks [*HFN* Aug '22] and Momentum HD preamp [*HFN* Apr '20]. Esoteric's K-01XD SACD player was joined by its Grandioso G-01X Master Clock Generator, while Nagra's Classic DAC II took on converter duties. As for sources, a Fidata HFAS10-KSS20U network audio server took it in turns with a Thales TTT-Slim II turntable. This was equipped with an Easy tonearm and Nagra Reference MC-6 and EMT HSD 006 MC pick-ups. One further gem was a Nagra Classic Phono MM/MC preamplifier [*HFN* Aug '22].
www.marten.se

Another pedigree brand with a presence at the show was Technics, which demonstrated its SU-GX70 streaming amp and SU-G700M2 integrated. The SU-GX70 (below right) is said to be a fully digital design with 40W/ch into 8ohm on tap while the SU-G700M2 (top right) is rated at 70W/ch into 8ohm.
www.technics.com

Next month

HFN reports from the Hxos Eikona AV Show, Athens 2023

Prime cuts

From jazz gems to rocking rarities... **Ken Kessler** brings you 20 audiophile vinyl releases whose musical merit is more than a match for the meticulous mastering they've enjoyed

There are basically two types of audiophile LPs. The first are the brand-new sessions recorded to exploit a high-end system, from labels such as Sheffield Lab, Reference Recordings and others. The best are from name artists such as Dave Brubeck, Thelma Houston, Dave Grusin, Taj Mahal, Ry Cooder and others of that calibre, while the rest are deservedly forgotten. And the other category? It's the one with greater appeal, packed with sonic and musical spectaculars like the 1967 *Casino Royale* soundtrack [Colgems COSO-5005]. By virtue of brilliant recording quality and content, they have earned places in audiophiles' hearts.

PRESSED TO IMPRESS

The superior sound of recordings in this latter category is equal to the music, regardless of the mass-market origins of the pressings. And no apologies need to be made for the material, unlike LPs from unknown Swedish jazz trios or D-list classical pianists. Such mass-market gems are the reissues from Analogue Productions, Craft Recordings, Mobile Fidelity, Speakers Corner and others, chosen because the music and the sound merit re-releasing on pristine, thick vinyl. You won't find these labels wasting time with the musically naff or poor-sounding.

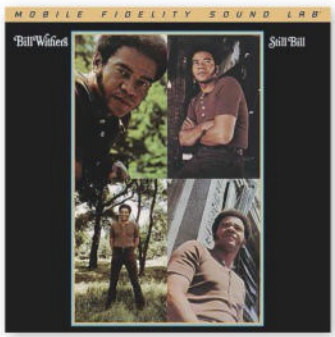
These pages include 20 titles spanning the decades, some obvious, some not, but all of which warrant your attention. Ranging from jazz to country to rock to prog, all were so good that even the normal pressings still dazzle. But these fresh cuts? Taken to another level.

BILL WITHERS

Still Bill

MoFi MFSL 1-525 Gain2 pressing

Most of Withers' albums would qualify here, not least because of the nature of his vocal textures – so rich that it's not hyperbolic to compare him to Lou Rawls. But *Still Bill* is arguably the finest album he ever released, and its appeal is rendered even greater for the inclusion of what was for many his timeless signature tune, 'Lean On Me'. The production was superb, and don't let the small print about the DSD256 stage between the 15ips



analogue source tape and the final product that accompanies this Mobile Fidelity reissue lead to you clutching your pearls. This is five-star soul music by any and every definition.

LEROY VINNEGAR SEXTET

Leroy Walks!

Craft Recordings/Contemporary CR00594 180g

Fans of Vinnegar will appreciate the pun of his debut album's title and how all the tracks have walking as a theme. The wordplay is that he was known for his 'walking' bass lines, Vinnegar exemplifying the style of ascending and descending notes, which added to the swing. An exemplar of audiophile sound circa 1958, this honey of an LP has been remastered from the original tapes by Bernie Grundman,

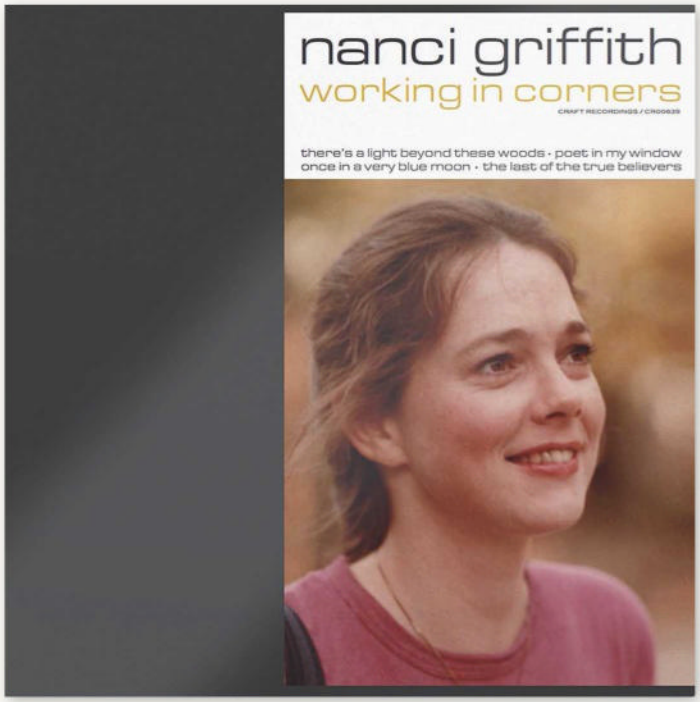
and he dug deep: you expect recordings from a group led by a bass player to excel in and to focus on the lower octaves. After all, you don't buy Stanley Clarke LPs to hear accordion.

NANCI GRIFFITH

Working In Corners

Craft Recordings CR00639 4LPs

Perhaps it's snobbery that keeps audiophiles from exploring country music beyond Messrs Atkins, Cash, or Nelson, but the late Nanci Griffith arrived in the much later wave of C&W singers proving that it wasn't all pick-up trucks and mullets. This superb box contains a foursome of her earlier albums: the 1978 debut, *There's A Light Beyond These Woods*, *Poet In My Window* (1982); *Once In A Very Blue Moon* (1984); and 1986 Grammy-nominated *The Last Of The True Believers*. When she first arrived, Griffith swiftly joined hi-fi show demo LP lists thanks to her crystal-clear voice and sublime songwriting. You can file her alongside Joni.



HARRY BELAFONTE

Belafonte At The Greek Theatre

Speakers Corner/RCA LSO-6009 2LPs 180g vinyl

Belafonte's two Carnegie Hall LPs of 1959/1960 are A-list, but this album from 1964 is a welcome change from their familiarity. All the material differs, and the hall's sound does, too, so it's not just 'more of the same'. Yes, it's even more political (which shouldn't interfere with musical pleasure) and, wow, could he hold an audience. This is a superb-sounding album, and those with the earlier sets will have fun comparing venues.

CHET ATKINS

Mister Guitar

Speakers Corner/RCA LSP2103 180g vinyl

It's 1959, classic RCA 'Living Stereo' era, and Chet Atkins – a picker fully worthy of the LP's title. A countrified answer to Les Paul, Atkins produced numerous smooth and mellow instrumental sets, this one containing 12 lush examples of his virtuosity. The air, the astonishing transients, the fluidity – it qualified as 'audiophile' even before the genre was born. Moreover, this Speakers Corner's pressing is immaculate, should you not own a mint original.

CROSBY, STILLS & NASH

Crosby, Stills & Nash

Atlantic RCD1 8229 clear vinyl

There are over a dozen ways to buy this in 2024 without even scouring secondhand sites for an original pressing. If you own MoFi's One-Step release, read no further. But the surprise of this, the Atlantic 75 anniversary reissue, is that it sounds terrific whatever the colour of the vinyl and how it was mastered. This recording always stood out as an exemplar of how a system handles harmonies. And aside from the sheer sound quality, it just may be one of the greatest rock LPs of all time.

THE EAGLES

Hotel California

MoFi UD1S 2-028 2x45rpm One-Step LPs

As this Left Coast epic is the most played-to-death LP at shows of the past 47 years, you can elicit a groan at its inclusion. This One-Step, however, yields even greater air, detail, clarity and bass cohesion than any version I've heard. The trigger warning is the DSD256 digital stage between the 15ips master tapes and your ears, but only masochists could be deterred from hearing The Eagles in all their glory. The album's party trick? The drum sounds.

KEITH JARRETT

Solo-Concerts Bremen Lausanne

ECM 1035-37 450 5325 3LPs 180g vinyl

Any true Jarrett devotee might have expected the more obvious sequel to this triple LP, the legendary 1975 Köln sessions. These, however, are nearly the equal, the performances captivating, the sound – well, it's exactly the sort of atmospheric recording which lets you get lost in a piano-only hypnotic jazz masterpiece over six sides. This stunning 50th anniversary box set is cut from the master tapes, and contains the original artwork plus a superb booklet.

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(S5t) Hi Fi News Dec 2023

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(R7t) Hi Fi News August 2022

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(S7t) the-ear.net

"It all sounded wonderfully three-dimensional."

(S4b) Hi Fi News June 2022

"It's an essential audition if you're after a serious, grown-up standmount."

(R5m) Hi Fi Choice July 2023

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SANTANA
Borboletta

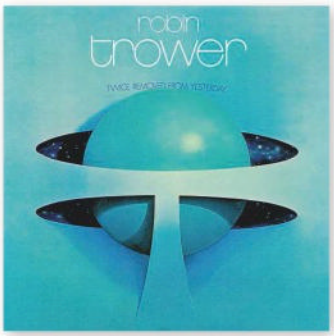
Speakers Corner/Columbia PC33135 180g vinyl

In the same way that *Aja* dominates Steely Dan's oeuvre, and Belafonte's Carnegie Hall sessions overshadow the Greek Theater gig, *Abraxas* has stolen the thunder from Santana's other albums. *Borboletta* may have been forgotten, but it's easier to chill out to as it's more cool jazz than most of the band's other works. [Note this is not a Carlos Santana solo LP.] If you need respite from *Abraxas* but still crave stellar guitar work and Latin-infused percussion, this fits the bill.

RAY BARRETTO
Que Viva La Musica

Craft Recordings/Fania CR00553 180g vinyl

World music was prominent in the early days of hi-fi, especially Latin genres. The legendary percussionist Barretto, like Tito Puente, represented Puerto Rico's contribution, crossing over to the mainstream. With drums the foundation of Barretto's work, this 50th anniversary reissue of the 1972 album incorporates African beats, hints of India and other influences. If you're housing massive speakers, this is up there with Kodo drums for woofer-worrying.



ROBIN TROWER
Twice Removed From Yesterday

Chrysalis CDVX1533 2LPs

Marking the 50th anniversary of guitarist Trower's post-Procol Harum solo debut is this magnificent 2LP version. The first contains the original, remastered album, while the second gives us alternate mixes and a whole side from a John Peel BBC session dated 26/03/73. As LP2 is the result of mixed sources, LP1 is the qualifier here, and the sound is on a par with a Santana album as a showcase for guitar. Remember: for some, Trower was the heir to Jimi Hendrix.

RUN-DMC
Raising Hell

MoFi MFSV 1-537 SuperVinyl

Rap and hip-hop torment audiophiles who must reconcile monstrous drums, bass, and transients with mainly spoken vocals and plenty of sampled music. But that thinking would eliminate every synth-based band, *eg*, Kraftwerk, so approach this as someone in the 1960s would Joe Meek's sonic experiments. This 1986 smash is a musical milestone as the first multi-platinum hip-hop record, while the 'Walk This Way' mash-up with Aerosmith's participation still dazzles.

ORNETTE COLEMAN
Something Else!!!!

Craft Recordings/Contemporary CR00595 180g vinyl

Another album to benefit from mastering by Bernie Grundman, this was saxophonist Coleman's 1958 solo debut LP, predating 1960's abstract *Free Jazz*, which some find hard to handle to this day. *Something Else!!!!* is about as user-friendly as ever Coleman got, the music imbued with the blues and more in line with the bebop of the previous decade, but it's still edgy and experimental by late-1950s standards. The soundstage containing the quintet is an exemplar of the spacing of the players – ironic when you consider that initially it was only available in mono – while Coleman's sax is presented with chilling impact.

CARLY SIMON
These Are The Good Old Days

Rhino/Elektra R724993 2LPs

Curated from her first three LPs by Elektra founder Jac Holzman and Ted Olson, this anthology comes with a fine booklet containing musings from Jac and Carly, plus two rare tracks to tempt completists. The sound is superb, made all the more exciting if you haven't heard the songs in some time. Simon's albums swiftly made their mark in the '70s, especially as people wanted to hear Mick Jagger in the background on 'You're So Vain'.

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VARIOUS ARTISTS

Hit The Bongo! The Latin Soul Of Tico Records

Craft Recordings CR00660 2LPs

Celebrating a label beloved of fans of Latin jazz, this wonderful 2LP set marks the 75th anniversary of Tico Records, though it's a bit odd in that most of the tracks are mono despite the oldest being recorded as late as 1962. That said, mono has its uses if you're challenging the capabilities of your system. The selections come from Ray Barretto [see p35], Tito Puente, Willie Bobo and other giants of the genre, with standout tracks including Puente's 'Oye Como Va', Celia Cruz and Puente with a killer 'Aquarius/Let The Sun Shine In', La Lupe's 'Fever' and the ear-opening 'Tighten Up' by The Modern Sound Of Al Escobar.

STEELY DAN

Countdown To Ecstasy/Pretzel Logic/Aja

Geffen/Universal B0034988-01/B0034986-01/ B0035028-01 180g vinyl

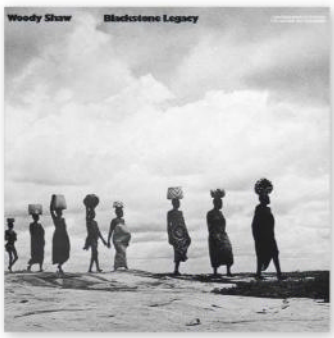
Is there an audiophile over 50 who's missing a copy of *Aja*, one of the most demo'd LPs of all time? If (like me) Audiophile Productions' 45rpm reissues are beyond your budget, Geffen is re-releasing the Dan's entire catalogue on heavy vinyl. Beyond *Aja*, *Countdown To Ecstasy* and *Pretzel Logic* contain classics such as 'My Old School' and 'Rikki Don't Lose That Number'. It's arguably the coolest music of the rock era.

THELONIUS MONK

Big Band and Quartet In Concert/ Monk In Tokyo

Speakers Corner CS8964/SOPW69-70 2LPs

So closely linked are these two live albums that they easily could have been issued as a box set. *Monk In Tokyo*, with the Quartet, dates from May 1963 while The Big Band and Quartet *In Concert* was recorded at Lincoln Center, Philharmonic Hall, New York in December 1963. Only a couple of numbers appear on both, and you get the rare chance to compare two sublime recordings in different venues, with small and large ensembles.

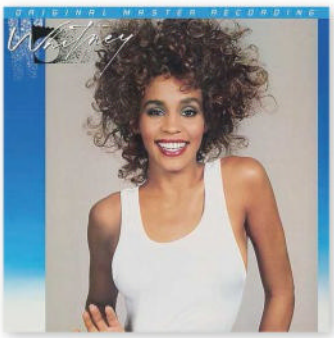


WOODY SHAW

Blackstone Legacy

Contemporary Records CR00520 2LPs 180g vinyl

What a lineup! The late jazz trumpet maestro assembled an incredible group for his official debut, recorded in late 1970, which included Gary Bartz on saxes, Bennie Maupin on sax and clarinet, and Ron Carter playing bass. Described as 'post-bop', it resides in a space between the accessible and the radical, tilted toward African jazz, and clearly of its era thanks to its political element. Sonically? All about the atmosphere, with tweeter-testing transients and rich bass.



WHITNEY HOUSTON

Whitney

MoFi MFSV 1-529 SuperVinyl

Because her ending was a tragic waste, some find listening to Houston a trial. Put that aside as she was one of the few vocalists worthy of being mentioned on the same page as Aretha Franklin. Her 1985 sophomore release captures the astonishing vocal range, kicking off with 'I Wanna Dance With Somebody (Who Loves Me)', while ten more inspired 25m global sales. It's post-disco, so there's heavy drum machine usage, but this is all about the voice, which soars.

WARREN ZEVON

Excitable Boy

MoFi MFSL2-513 2x45rpm LPS

Though I adored Zevon, I never considered his LPs 'audiophile' *per se* despite being reissued by specialist labels. This 45rpm version, however, elevates to five-star status what many consider his best album. 'Werewolves Of London' is an all-time favourite, so hearing it with magnified impact from its room-filling bass and the frenetic guitar assault acquiring even more ferocity – let's just say it's a showstopper. As for 'Nighttime In The Switching Yard'? Never funkier.

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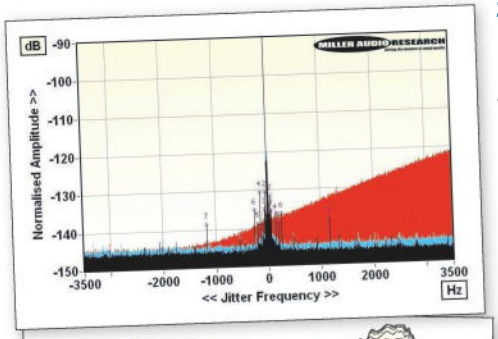

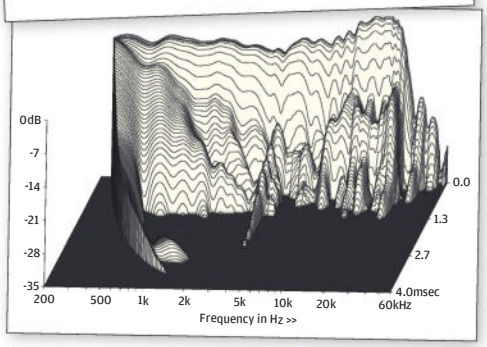

1. Our hardware reviews are never brief 'hands on' experiences of a product from a press conference, brand-led demo or distributor's back room spun up into a four or five page article.

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LEFT: Innovative, research-based test & measurement – with exclusive colour 'data visualisation' – underpins every review in *Hi-Fi News*. In each issue you will discover performance-determining facts that are unique to our reporting

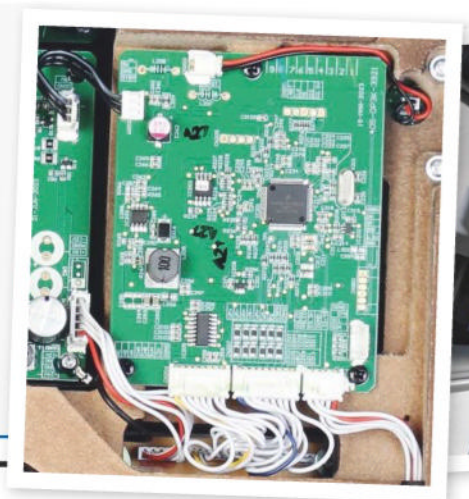
ABOVE: Available in three striking baffle colours, the new Lumina V Amator from Sonus faber still has a black cabinet and plinth. Here's our photoshoot, and see the full review on p70

5. Above all we respect our readers. You demand the best reviews informed by decades of experience, product knowledge and technical expertise. We endeavour to live up to that expectation.

IN THIS ISSUE...

LEFT: Only *Hi-Fi News* takes you up close and personal, outside and in, with our in-depth reviews of the latest, cutting-edge gear. Here's the PWM motor controller board inside Denon's new DP-3000NE direct-drive deck [p54].

RIGHT: Here's *HFN* regular (and editor of sister title *Home Cinema Choice*) Mark Craven setting up Audiolab's 9000N network streamer/DAC [see p66]. It partners the 9000CDT/9000A CD transport/amp [*HFN* Aug '23].



Two-way standmount loudspeaker
Made by: Franco Serblin Studio, Vicenza, Italy
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd, UK
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
Web: www.francoserblin.it; www.absolutesounds.com
Prices: £8888 (+£2798 for stands)

Franco Serblin Accordo Goldberg

Inspired by the diminutive and still current Accordo, the Goldberg variation features a larger cabinet and bass/mid driver, and integral crossover. Is bigger always better?
Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Odd though this might sound, it bothers me when PM gives me a sequence of exceptional loudspeakers to review. Can there really be that many miraculous designs, one after the other – or am I growing soft? Following models from DeVore Fidelity [*HFN* Aug '23] and Wilson Audio [*HFN* Sep '23], and reborn LS3/5As, I find myself with a new Franco Serblin speaker that has rocked my world. The Accordo Goldberg could be, overall, the best yet to come out of the fertile brain of the inspirational if, sadly, late designer.

Costing £8888 plus £2798 for optional stands (a situation to be discussed below), the Goldberg is slightly dearer than the smaller Accordo *sans* suffix [*HFN* Jan '18]. Above it is the floorstanding Accordo Essence [*HFN* Jan '21], but that's another beast altogether. Moving from the Accordo to Accordo Goldberg, however, is entirely a case of dimensional differences, and re-housing the crossover, though both are standmounts of not-too-considerable sizes.

Yet the Goldberg so audibly exhibits vivid proof of size mattering that it's like moving from a 100W to a 250W amplifier. This is, however, deceptive as the Goldberg ostensibly follows the same formula as the regular Accordo, with the same asymmetrical wing-shaped design. And like the Accordo, the Goldberg is necessarily supplied in mirror-imaged pairs.

MUSIC OF THE SPHERES

Sharing minimalist crossovers, moved from stand to cabinet in the Goldberg, the latter also retains Franco Serblin's 29mm silk-dome tweeter, designed by Ragnar Lian. However, the Accordo's 150mm 'sliced paper cone' bass/mid driver is replaced here with a 180mm 'microsphere cone' with aluminium dust cap, and to accommodate this larger woofer, and crossover PCB, the rear-ported enclosure has been upscaled from the Accordo's 36x19x36cm (hwd) to 40.5x24x43cm.

As these dimensions reveal, the speakers are far deeper than they are wide. Do not, however, anticipate viewing a narrow frontal aspect. What you see when the speakers are positioned according to the manufacturer's instructions is a three-quarter view – the cabinets toed-in so that they cross in front of the listener. You will need to experiment with the toe-in up to a point because the Accordo Goldberg and its siblings are speakers that deliver intense focus when it comes to imaging. In this respect, they are not unlike Quad 57s, all Wilson Audio speakers, every line array I can think of and other types which respond audibly to even the tiniest of toe-in adjustments, unlike omni-directional, dipole designs or others which are more forgiving in this respect.

> 'Its rear-ported enclosure has been upscaled'

ALL-ANGLE APPEAL

Which brings us to a key aspect of the Franco Serblin experience. As he was the man who single-handedly revolutionised the way speakers look – and I will challenge anyone who disputes that – the Goldberg is simply gorgeous. So handsome is the design, from the highly polished wood

FRANCO SERBLIN

Franco Serblin launched Sonus faber in 1983 to realise his dream of creating superb speakers which looked as good as they sounded. Back then, the world was awash with dull-looking boxes but Serblin's application of Italian wood-working standards and innate style would banish the mundane forever. He started with the legendary Snail, now a collector's item. It consisted of a central enclosure for the bass units, to which were attached two 'arms' supporting the satellites. While central subs and satellites became a genre of their own, the most impactful element was the look: stunning curved-edge enclosures far removed from the unimaginative rectangular cabinets still employed by much of the audio industry.

Sonus faber would grow into a major brand, Serblin leaving it in 2006 after 33 years to pursue a more purist, if less commercial approach to design, starting with the Ktêma [*HFN* Sep '20], which took five years to realise. Upon his passing in 2013, Franco's son-in-law, Massimilano Favella [see interview sidebar, p45] took over. Says Favella: 'Today I am carrying on his legacy, always trying to respect and practise what he taught me, and to secure the future of this small but precious company. I am honoured to carry on the philosophy with the same values that he passed on to me from 1995 until his death'.

'Franco Serblin single-handedly revolutionised the way speakers look'

LEFT: The Accordo Goldberg's detachable 'grille' is composed of elastic strands stretched between chromed arcs at the top and bottom of the cabinet. These are in tension, so care is needed during removal

surfaces to the magnesium alloy 'decoupling' plates, chrome accents and elastic string grilles, that even when toed-in quite severely these speakers inspire admiration rather than consternation. They look right from every angle. Then we come to the matter of the stands and the oddity of their separate pricing.

Because of the unusual shape of the Accordo Goldberg, it is – like its smaller sibling – almost impossible to fit onto other, conventional stands, even if you have a pair of the same 74cm height. Too deep and too narrow to rest on a support with a small enough plate to fit within the 24cm width, the speakers must be tightly secured to the stands, and are supplied with dedicated, chromed hardware for the purpose – the fitments are just visible under the top plate of the stand in our pictures.

'There was just the right balance of rasp and honk'

COME TOGETHER

The Accordo is priced with its stands at £7498 because they contain the crossover, while the Goldberg's supports, with their swan-neck pillar and polished chrome top/bottom plates flared for optimum stability, are listed separately despite being absolutely mandatory. You must dismiss any notion that these speakers could be shelf-mounted just because they are small-ish two-ways. Shelf-mounting is not just inadvisable, it's all-but-impossible because the Goldbergs are rear-ported and the instructions emphatically state they should be located at least 100cm from side and rear walls. The point of this is to tell you to treat the Accordo Goldberg not as costing £8888 per pair, but as £11,686 per pair. And they are still worth every penny.

Once you've dealt with the assembly of the stands and the positioning, you can also be reassured that this enlarged Accordo does not quite gobble up wattage the same way Serblin's hungriest models, like the original Extrema [*HFN* Oct '91], did back in his Sonus faber days [see PM's Lab Report, p47]. Serblin recommends a minimum 40W amplifier power which is far from an unlikely match at this price point.

SETTING THE STAGE

Named after the Bach composition rather than the WWE wrestler or the TV show, the Accordo Goldberg is so revealing that I was concerned it might deliver too forensic a sound. The deception continued: more than any speaker I have heard in the past few years, its sound adheres to a premise I first learned of back in the 1980s. As with designs from DeVore, D'Agostino, SoundSmith, de Paravicini and others conceived by auteurs, the Goldberg is the embodiment of Franco Serblin's philosophy.

First and foremost, as evinced by the almost tyrannical strictures regarding placement, soundstage reproduction is arguably the primary concern. I recall Franco Serblin explaining to me his admiration for the concept of the proscenium, as one would expect of a designer almost exclusively concerned with live classical performances. Every loudspeaker he designed explored this aspect, echoing what I was also told by Infinity's co-founder Arnie Nudell – if the soundstage is right, so is the rest.

RIGHT: The asymmetric wooden cabinets are 'hand crafted by master artisans' and further braced with aluminium/magnesium alloy sheets. The 29mm Ragnar Lian silk-dome tweeter is joined by a 180mm 'microsphere' bass/mid cone with alloy dust cap

MASSIMILIANO FAVELLA

The Accordo Goldberg isn't the first speaker named after a musician, composer or musical work, and it won't be the last, but its story will resonate with those who appreciate both the mindset of the late Franco Serblin and how the company which bears his name remains a family affair. At the time of Franco's passing, he left enough designs and concepts to keep the brand fuelled for years – not difficult when you consider how rarely new models are introduced. This is a brand that takes its time.

As Franco's son-in-law Massimiliano Favella explains, 'The Accordo Goldberg, like the other speakers I have developed in the last few years – Lignea and Accordo Essence – took a few years to come to fruition'. Like Franco, Massimiliano does not rush his projects. 'I was struck by the perfection of JS Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, and why this work came to light.' Not least, it resonated specifically with the company, rather than simply being a piece which appealed in general.

Says Massimiliano: 'In the last year of his life, Franco repeatedly listened to this work. In time, I researched it and understood why Franco listened to it with such pleasure'. Just as Franco had honoured the great violin makers when he owned Sonus faber, so was Massimiliano moved to celebrate the music itself.

Will we see similarly named speakers in the future? 'I don't like to make predictions about what the brand will look like in the coming years', says Massimiliano. 'But I love to develop new speaker products, to provide answers for all lovers of good music reproduction.'

Categorically, the Accordo Goldberg deftly places the performers – whether a group or solo – in the space created by the triangle formed by the speakers' siting. At first it was disconcerting, because I have grown used to sounds outside of the speakers' edges, but I soon adapted to the notion of a tightly defined space between them. This area's dimensions could be 'dialled in' according to the size of the room, with the benefit of opening up even the artificial soundstage of a studio-assembled recording.

It was The Who's live version, though, of 'Baba O'Riley' [*Who's Next/Life House*; Polydor 3585826 CD] that conveyed to me the success of the Accordo Goldberg in adhering to Franco's mission statement. As much as all classical orchestral devotees like to remind philistines such as I that live music is the only arbiter of accurate reproduction, the reality is that grand orchestras in massive halls are far more amorphous than small works fashioned in studios, however artificial the instrument placement. And what can better a lone voice or instrument for testing a system's veracity and accuracy?

LOST IN MUSIC

I never bought into that talk about hearing 'the fourth violin from the left', so The Who's 'wall of sound' as presented by this recording is no less valid than a five-star Deutsche Grammophon album. But through the Goldbergs, within the confines established by the way they were positioned, I heard a perfectly formed diorama with image height and soundstage depth that rendered me nearly stupefied.

It was, as Franco always wanted to proffer, a path to losing one's self in the music. Listening to The Who's audience, despite it being in two-channel rather than surround, produced a clue to the Serblin formula – it was all-embracing. And that, it turns out, is the primary nature of the Accordo Goldberg. The miracle is that this sensation is not a product of the speaker being too soft or forgiving.

LEFT: Although 'optional' the Accordo Goldberg stands, with their angled black column and chromed top and bottom plates, are *de rigueur* – the speakers bolt into position from below via custom hardware that mirrors the spikes fitted to the flared baseplate

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LEFT: The larger Goldberg cabinet houses a two-way crossover, WBT binding posts and large reflex port. Each handed pair is individually number

Instead, it revealed another unexpected trait, which again recalled the original Extrema.

DELICIOUS BEATS

As cultured and refined as was Franco Serblin, the Accordo Goldberg standmounts sounded better the *louder* they were played. It reminded me, too, of another conversation with Franco, who was no head-banger. He posited that every CD, LP or tape has an optimum playback level, clipping, breakup or distortion notwithstanding. Listening to harmonica so life-like that the SPLs seemed merely incidental, I understood what he meant, grabbing a harmonica of my own to hear the reeds and the levels.

Steely Dan's *Can't Buy A Thrill* [Analogue Productions CAPP134SA SACD] turned the clock back to the first time I heard the saxophone break in 'Dirty Work', with just the right balance of rasp and honk. Likewise, pace/rhythm/timing junkies would revel in the opening bongo patterns of the same album's 'Do It Again', delicious beats with the sounds of the heads almost shimmering. As for the vocals, I started imagining what an LS3/5A would sound like with a couple of octaves extending the bottom, and another 10dB added to the levels.

Throughout all my listening, there was a silkiness to the Accordo Goldberg's performance, a non-aggressive way with detail that had me scratching my head. How could there be this much detail without it sounding hyper-etched? The better tracks from the remastered 2023 edition of The Beatles' 'Red' collection, *1962-1966* [Apple 0602455920768] were even more revelatory than when I first played them, having grown accustomed to the remastering. The Goldberg is transparent enough to satisfy the forensically inclined who want to hear the differences.

YOUR MAJESTY

Ultimately, I was wooed by something so uncharacteristic that I have to nod to the Goldbergs for rendering fascinating a genre I usually ignore – stadium rock. Whitesnake's 'Here I Go Again' from *Greatest Hits* [Rhino R1 680917] afforded one more discovery, and it's that the Accordo Goldberg sounds as massive and majestic as even the larger Essence. Franco: your company is in good hands.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Immediacy plays no role with this speaker. It must be learned, savoured like fine wine, in order to appreciate what it can do. The Accordo Goldberg handles the delicacy of acoustic guitar and ear-busting thrash, *a cappella* vocals and orchestral. Were I of a metaphysical bent, I would swear I sensed the spirit of Franco Serblin in my room. This is, like his first designs of 40 years ago, a sonic masterpiece.

Sound Quality: 89%

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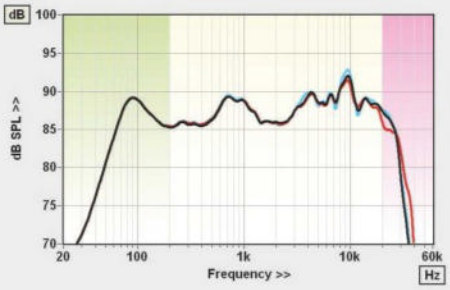
LAB REPORT

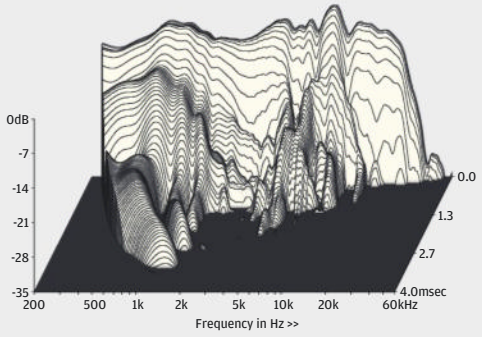
FRANCO SERBLIN ACCORDO GOLD.

The latest Accordo's increased cabinet volume and a larger 180mm bass/mid driver bring with it performance dividends over the smaller model [*HFN* Jan '18]. Although both Accordos are rated at the same 87dB/1m/2.83V, the Goldberg is markedly more sensitive, not least because the uplift in response from 600Hz-1.2kHz [see Graph 1, below] boosts the 1kHz figure to a generous 88.8dB. The gentle dip in upper midrange reduces the averaged (500Hz-8kHz) figure to 87.8dB but this still bests the brand's conservative spec. The response recovers above 4kHz but a peak at 9kHz and dip at 300Hz both contribute to slightly high ±4.1dB and ±3.8dB response errors, respectively, though pair matching is tight at 0.6dB over the same 200Hz-20kHz. The elastic grille is not entirely invisible, exaggerating the peaks from 6-10kHz [blue trace, Graph 1] but offers no further attenuation of the soft-dome's gentle 25kHz HF roll-off (–6dB re. 10kHz).

A driver mode is seen on the CSD waterfall at ~5kHz [Graph 2] but THD is low enough at 0.2-0.5% from 400Hz-10kHz at 90dB/1m – the increase to ~1.5% at much lower frequencies not unexpected for the enclosure/driver size. The latter has a slightly peaky reflex alignment at 96Hz but operates over a wide 66Hz-1.3kHz bandwidth, extending to a diffraction-corrected 47Hz (–6dB re. 200Hz) courtesy of the broad 15-120Hz port output (also –6dB). Serblin's specified 3.8ohm/5.5kHz impedance minimum is met at 3.9ohm/5.5kHz while never dropping below 6ohm from 20Hz-3kHz. As a result the sub-100Hz +45°/–57° phase angles only squeeze the EPDR down to an 'easy' 2.7ohm/110Hz with the true minimum appearing at 1.8ohm/3.4kHz. **PM**



ABOVE: Response inc. nearfield summed driver/port [green], freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V [yellow], ultrasonic [pink]. Left, black; right, red; w. grille, blue



ABOVE: The cabinet is well damped but a bass/mid-driver mode is seen at ~5kHz prior to the 10kHz peak

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V – 1kHz/Mean/IEC)	88.8dB / 87.8dB / 85.7dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	3.9ohm @ 5.5kHz 48ohm @ 80Hz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	–57° @ 88Hz +45° @ 72Hz
Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz–20kHz)	0.6dB/ ±4.1dB/±3.8dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	47Hz / 25.3kHz/24.3kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.5% / 0.35% / 0.5%
Dimensions (HWD) / **Weight** (each)	405x240x430mm / 12.5kg

USB DAC with nuvistor gain stage
Made by: Musical Fidelity (Audio Tuning Vertriebs GmbH), Austria
Supplied by: Henley Audio Ltd, UK
Telephone: 01235 511166
Web: www.musicalfidelity.com; www.henleyaudio.co.uk
Price: £9999

Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista DAC

The miniature nuvistor 'tube' continues its inexorable march through Musical Fidelity's latest separates, defining the flagship products in its range. Now it's the turn of the DAC
Review: **Jamie Biesemans** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Since Heinz Lichtenegger acquired Musical Fidelity in 2018, the company has appeared truly revitalised, particularly at the upper end of its range. Working with the UK design team, the Pro-Ject boss has resurrected the nuvistor tube-based Nu-Vista line with a slew of new models. And Lichtenegger is a big believer in separates – just in case the many pocket-sized boxes Pro-Ject produces hadn't made that clear – so while on the one hand the EISA Award-winning Nu-Vista 800.2 integrated amplifier [*HFN* Aug '23] provides a one-stop solution, there's also Musical Fidelity's Nu-Vista PRE/PAS pairing [*HFN* Mar '23], the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 phono stage [*HFN* Feb '24], and now the Nu-Vista DAC.

There's also a separate, outboard power supply slated for the Nu-Vista range, and it's hardly a secret that a Nu-Vista CD player is next up, considering the manual of this £9999 DAC explicitly mentions it, in relation to its I²S input [see PM's Interview sidebar, p51]. I also get the distinct impression there will be more, but whatever the future brings the Nu-Vista range has you covered now if you desire to 'go big' with your system building. The Nu-Vista DAC is a good match for the Nu-Vista 800.2 integrated too, adding flexible digital connectivity to Musical Fidelity's flagship analogue amplifier.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

DACs can often be anonymous boxes dutifully converting streams without bothering anyone. The Nu-Vista DAC isn't one of those, though. Like its brethren, its size and design make it a 'presence' in the room. You won't slip this 21.5kg unit into a random hi-fi rack, as its footprint is large. Just to make it clear that this isn't your run-of-the-mill D/A converter, you can peek inside and see its eight nuvistor triode valves surrounded by a red glowing light while the unit is starting up (then yellow, followed by blue after ten minutes or so).

The Nu-Vista DAC's finely crafted chassis is shared with the series' other models. Available in brushed black or silver, it's a sizeable enclosure (483mm wide and 510mm deep), but with a front panel that angles away from the listener at the top and bottom. When installing the DAC, you can choose which feet to use – rubber ones are in place, but there are felt and spike options included.

'PCM or DSD is shouted in a huge font'

A front-panel display on the Nu-Vista 800.2 integrated amp shows off a large VU meter; here a similar display indicates the nature of the audio stream you're listening to. 'PCM' or 'DSD' is shouted in a huge font, with bitrate and selected filter presented next to it. Various MQA-related labels are possible too, including (new for me) OFS – which stands for Original Frequency Spectrum, *ie*, a previously decoded MQA stream. Overall, this display is simple but effective, and you can choose whether it shows black text on a white background, or vice versa.

Flanking the screen are large dials to change input or adjust the volume level, the DAC supporting both fixed and variable output over its unbalanced RCA and balanced XLR outputs. The second of these controls, together with buttons below, is also used to access the device's settings menus. There's more to be found here than you might expect, including

RIGHT: PSU transformer [top left] feeds HT supplies [main PCB and see p51] for the two pairs of nuvistor 'tubes' [right] per channel in addition to the XMOS USB/Altera DSP/ ES9038Q2M DAC-based digital stages [far right]

ABOVE: Pictured here in its silver livery, the Nu-Vista DAC's two huge rotaries govern source selection [left], volume and navigation [right] of the comprehensive configuration menu

seven digital filters hardcoded into its ESS Hyperstream II DAC chip(s) for use with PCM audio, plus Musical Fidelity's own 'Optimal Transient' filter [see PM's boxout, below]. Like the brand's more affordable M6x DAC [*HFN* Jul '22], and many more besides, the Nu-Vista DAC panders to audiophiles who desire to experiment.

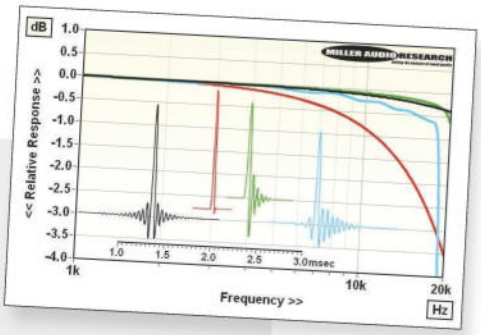
HEROIC HANDSET

I remember being irked by the remote control bundled with Musical Fidelity's M8xi integrated amplifier [*HFN* Jul '20], but critical words are not required here. The new Nu-Vista series gets a bulky, milled aluminium handset [see p53], making for an impressive piece of gadgetry which can also be used to exercise your arm muscles while listening to *The Dark Side Of The Moon*. More importantly, it's actually useful, even when the DAC is being used in fixed output. Flicking through filters and engaging reclocking and upsampling is all part of this model's attraction, and using the remote is faster than changing settings via the DAC's display, allowing you to more easily compare filter types, *etc*.

The core of the Nu-Vista DAC is formed by two ES9038Q2M DAC devices. Although strictly speaking these are meant for mobile products, there's nothing wrong with using them in high-end hi-fi, especially in the dual differential configuration here. ESS's Hyperstream II platform supports playback of virtually all hi-res material out there, including MQA and up to 768kHz PCM and DSD512. As usual, this is through the Nu-Vista DAC's USB-B port; the optical, coaxial and AES/EBU inputs are more limited, but do cater to DSD64 and 384kHz MQA.

The dual ESS DAC configuration – and Super Silent power transformer – is also present downrange in Musical Fidelity's M6x DAC, but is improved upon here with a proprietary clock, separate PSUs for the analogue and digital stages, and a custom oversampling bypass mode active when playing 705.6/768kHz PCM. Neither should we forget this model's nuvistor tube output stage, which is what the Nu-Vista family in general and this DAC specifically is all about.

There are four of these tubes per channel, making for a balanced Class A output with, says MF, 'ultra-low distortion and unfathomably low noise'. The inclusion of the nuvistor triodes is also a compelling argument for not waiting around too long to acquire a Nu-Vista DAC. Heinz Lichtenegger says the company has ample NOS stocks, but the fact is they are no longer manufactured.



DIGITAL DANCING

Not only does the Nu-Vista DAC employ an XMOS micro and Altera CPLD to process DSD/MQA streams via USB, with reclocking, there's plenty of spare overhead to accommodate a 'bypass' upsampling mode in addition to a custom 'Optimal Transient' filter algorithm. The latter [red traces, inset Graph] was first seen in the Audiolab M-DAC [*HFN* Sep '12] courtesy of roving designer John Westlake and joins seven other filter choices that come 'pre-packaged' with the ES9038 DAC. 'Optimal Transient' is very close to a 'NOS' filter, trading zero pre/post ringing (no time domain distortion) for little or no stopband rejection (just 1.6dB) and a mid-treble roll-off of –0.9dB/10kHz to –3.5dB/20kHz with CD sources. The advantages of this filter are best realised with higher – 88.2kHz upwards – sample rate files/streams. The 'Upsampling' mode bypasses the named digital filters but is still a filter in its own right with the properties of a medium-tap minimum phase design [green traces]. It offers a limited 12dB stopband rejection and response that reaches out to –0.6dB/20kHz, –11.3dB/45kHz and –13.2dB/90kHz with 48kHz, 96kHz and 192kHz media, respectively.

The remaining (ESS) filters include two linear phase types [the black traces are Linear Phase Fast] that offer a constant group delay, yielding a time-coherent output, and two minimum phase options that free the impulse response of any unnatural, acausal pre-ringing but increase post-ringing and incur a non-linear group delay. Both 'Fast' versions offer a 75-83dB stopband rejection and similar –0.4dB/20kHz, –2.2dB/45kHz and –5.6dB/90kHz responses and are ideal for low sample rate (CD/48kHz) file types. The Apodising and Brickwall options are linear phase with their own 'twists' in the time/frequency domains while 'Corrected Phase' [blue traces] is equivalent to the 'Hybrid' option seen on competing outboard DACs with ESS converters. PM

CHARACTER BUILDING

Company hyperbole aside [and see PM's Lab Report, p53] the Nu-Vista DAC has serious sonic appeal. It combines exceptional detail with subtlety and a smooth delivery, always seeming to convey the character, atmosphere and feel of your music. Set up with Primare PRE35/A35.8

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ABOVE: Also available in a matt black chassis with silver rotaries, the display can be inverted with dark text on a bright background to achieve a further aesthetic and operational contrast

amplifiers [*HFN* Dec '19 & May '22] and Focal Sopra N°2 floorstanders [*HFN* Sep '15], it wasted no time in grabbing my attention and not letting go.

On *Why Does The Earth Give Us People To Love?* [September Recordings SEP-009; 48kHz/24-bit], the music seems to take second place to the singing of Kara Jackson. Then again, the former National Youth Poet Laureate knows how to craft a song that balances orchestration with storytelling. There are plenty of subtle layers to the nearly eight-minute-long 'Rat', for example, which this DAC easily revealed, in this case fed by an iFi Audio NEO Stream [*HFN* Mar '23] over USB (using I²S over HDMI failed because their implementations are different – it's not a standard in the strictest sense of the word).

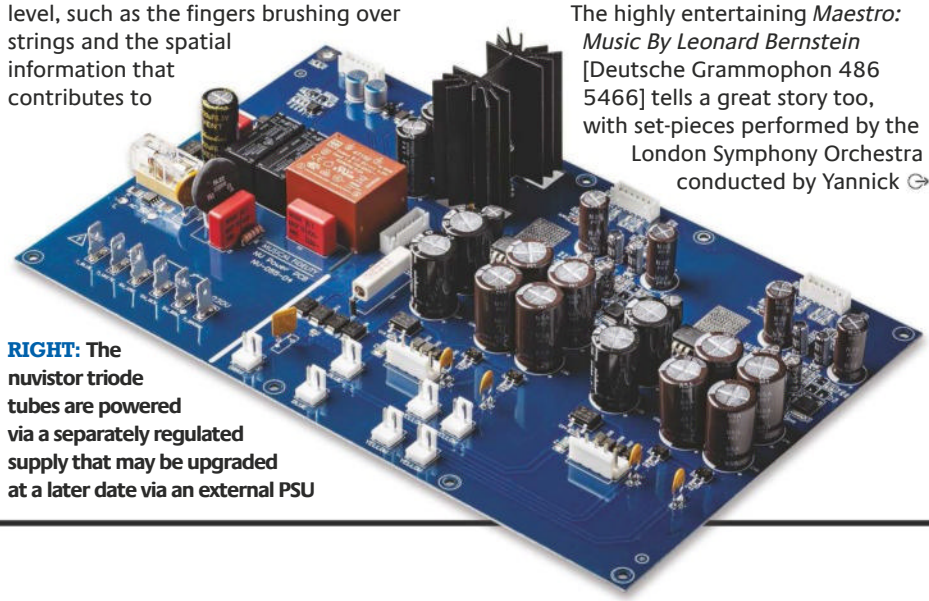
> 'I leant from my chair, ready to emulate Bernstein'

SPACE INVADER

The song begins with an acoustic guitar riff, and the Nu-Vista DAC found all the detail you'd expect from a device at this level, such as the fingers brushing over strings and the spatial information that contributes to a 'live' ambience on a recording. Then there was the added smoothness that sets Musical Fidelity's nuvistor-based DAC apart from more clinically minded converters, making for a markedly more intimate listening experience. I was particularly impressed by the character it brought to the airy violin in the background, making this song just a bit more pensive.

I listened to the album again, letting Roon resample the PCM stream to DSD64. While this sounded a bit smoother with the Nu-Vista DAC, it did show that creating and transporting a DSD stream requires ample computing and network resources. Even with a Mac mini with Core i7 processor and a gigabit network, occasional dropouts marred the experience. But when all was in working order the Nu-Vista DAC took it up a notch in terms of timing and overall presentation. The same was true when upsampling to 768kHz via Roon and utilising the DAC's Oversampling Bypass mode.

The highly entertaining *Maestro: Music By Leonard Bernstein* [Deutsche Grammophon 486 5466] tells a great story too, with set-pieces performed by the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Yannick



RIGHT: The nuvistor triode tubes are powered via a separately regulated supply that may be upgraded at a later date via an external PSU

HEINZ LICHTENEGGER

The founder of Austria's Audio Tuning Vertriebs GmbH (incorporating Pro-Ject and Musical Fidelity among other brands), Heinz Lichtenegger is 'very happy to now have a complete lineup, though we have no plans at present to build a partnering loudspeaker!'. *HFN* is still anticipating the outboard Nu-Vista PSU which, promises Heinz, 'has multiple outputs to service both the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 *and* the Nu-Vista DAC'.

The PSU will follow MF's long experience with choke regulation and will likely be based on the supply we saw to accompany the PRE PSU [*HFN* Mar '23]. Furthermore, the Nu-Vista PSU, like the analogue stage of the Nu-Vista DAC, springs from the pen of MF designer Simon Quarry while the DAC's digital build is assisted by Canor in Slovakia. The 'Optimal Transient' digital filter is clearly a speciality of consultant John Westlake who, Heinz reminds us, 'was involved in the DAC design, having already worked with Pro-Ject and Canor in the past'.

Next to come is the Nu-Vista 600.2 integrated amplifier, slated for mid-year, while the close of 2024 should see 'the Nu-Vista CD transport/player, which will have the option of a plug-in DAC', explains Heinz. 'This card will not be at the level of the Nu-Vista DAC, probably using the same ES DAC but without the dual-mono nuvistor output stage. It will have a solid-state output but these will still be on RCAs and XLRs while the digital outs will include coaxial, optical and AES/EBU.'

And sister brand Pro-Ject is never far from Heinz's mind: 'We will have a new-look turntable for €1500'. PM

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ABOVE: The Nu-Vista DAC offers USB-B (768kHz/32-bit and DSD512), AES/EBU, coaxial and three optical inputs (192kHz/24-bit and DSD64) alongside RCA and balanced XLR outputs. The I²S (on HDMI) input is reserved for future use while the five-pin XLR sockets are included to service the outboard Nu-Vista PSU upgrade

Nézet-Séguin interspersed with dialogue from the recent Bradley Cooper biopic. 'Chichester Psalms: Psalm 23' commenced with beatific chorales which the MF DAC painted on a large stage with real depth and height, plus an enticing 'organic' warmth. It had me leaning out of the listening chair, ready to emulate Bernstein's conducting antics.

FULL SPEED AHEAD

This track also introduced some impactful dynamics, as did the following 'Candide Overture'. Sudden changes of gear, with brass and percussion producing dramatic blasts, were handled without hesitation by the Nu-Vista DAC – those nuvistor valves don't make this unit listless at all.

That could have been a concern if you buy into the preconception that valves equal warmth equal sluggishness, but there's nuance and pace here. Yes, there's a touch of warmth too – a boon in this instance, as it nicely complemented my Focal Sopra N°2s – but it isn't to the detriment of the playback of complex, fast-tempo works.

In fact, this blend of rich warmth and speed of delivery blew some much-needed life into *A Humdrum Star*, the fourth album from the British 'nu-jazz' band GoGo Penguin [Blue Note download; 88.2kHz/24-bit]. There's no faulting this trio's skill as musicians, but the over-clean production makes some tracks, including the rapid-paced 'Raven' and 'Bardo', sound a bit dull otherwise. There's something to be said for a DAC that does more than slavishly convert digital data into analogue signals.

LEFT: Solid alloy remote offers control over all inputs, volume, upsampling, reclocking and digital filters

SILVER SERVICE

Because we're still waiting for the arrival of the Nu-Vista CD, I attached a Pro-Ject CD Box RS2 T CD transport [*HFN* Sep '19] to the Nu-Vista DAC via an optical connection. Marc Ribot's 'Happiness Is A Warm Gun' on *Saints* [Division One 83461-2], an album some 20 years old but still not yet available via streaming services, hints at what the marriage between a Nu-Vista CD player and DAC might deliver.

This isn't a straightforward cover of the Lennon-McCartney classic, but a demonstration of the artistry of one of the foremost guitarists around, able to nimbly hop from sweet harmonics to off-key notes. The beauty of the piece lies in its rich minimalism: as contradictory as that might sound, it's exactly that intense detail which the Nu-Vista DAC communicates so brilliantly.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Combining a trusted digital design with a nuvistor tube stage, the Nu-Vista DAC delivers a precise but – importantly – rousing performance. This sets it apart from more straightforward implementations, merging artisan thinking with the fine build quality demanded of a flagship model. It's an obvious partner for existing (or future) Nu-Vista separates, and also a very capable converter in its own right.

Sound Quality: 87%

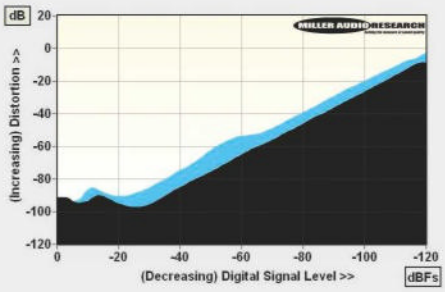
0 - - - - - - - - 100

LAB REPORT

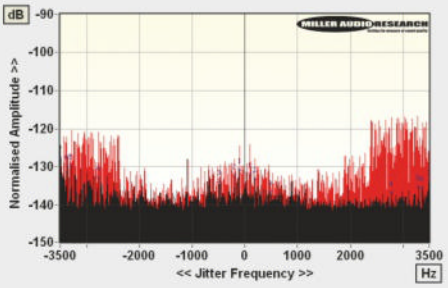
MUSICAL FIDELITY NU-VISTA DAC

There is one parallel between Audiolab's ES9038PRO-based 9000N network DAC [p66] and the ES9038Q2M-based Nu-Vista DAC tested here – both units clip at 0dBFs (full digital scale) with the 'Upsampling' mode switched on, the latter also needing to be switched off before the digital filters are enabled [see boxout, p49]. The Nu-Vista DAC uses a 'low power consumption' version of the ES9038 – more typically targeted at portable devices – which has a lower specification, however the uniform ~0.004% distortion (20Hz-20kHz/0dBFs) is set by the 7586 nuvistors rather than the DAC. So too is the 102dB A-wtd S/N ratio and the increase in output impedance from a low ~12ohm midband figure to a significant 1.1kohm at 20Hz – expect some cable/amplifier sensitivity at very low frequencies. Under ideal conditions, the Nu-Vista DAC has a very slight LF roll-off amounting to –0.05dB/40Hz and –0.5dB/10Hz.

Low-level resolution is true to ±0.2dB over a 100dB range (and –0.5dB adrift at –110dBFs) while distortion just nudges below 0.001% over the top 30dB of the DAC's dynamic range [see Graph 1, below]. MF's '<100 femtoseconds' (<0.1psec) specification for correlated jitter refers to the clock and not the DAC whose datalines are potentially subject to modulation from any number of local sources. In practice, figures of 25-75psec are more realistic – this is still excellent, but the correlated sidebands [see Graph 2] are joined by low-level spuriae that increase the *brighter* the display setting [red spectrum, Graph 2]. Mute that big display for minimum interference! Finally, the Nu-Vista DAC's analogue stage offers a good >90dB stereo separation and 0.08dB channel balance (all re. 20Hz-20kHz). **PM**



ABOVE: THD vs. 48kHz/24-bit digital signal level over a 120dB dynamic range (black, Linear phase fast, 1kHz; blue, Linear phase fast, 20kHz)



ABOVE: High resolution 24-bit/48kHz jitter spectrum with display off (black, with mkrs) and display on (red)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level / Impedance	4.02Vrms/12-1115ohm (XLR)
A-wtd S/N ratio	101.9dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.0045% / 0.00095%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.0039% / 0.0019%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	–0.0 to –0.4dB/–11dB/–13dB
Digital jitter (48kHz / 96kHz / 192kHz)	75psec / 25psec / 30psec
Resolution (1kHz @ –100dBFs/–110dBFs)	±0.2dB / ±0.5dB
Power consumption	38W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	483x188x510mm / 21.5kg

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Denon DP-3000NE

Having launched its first direct-drive deck over a half century ago, and its last over a decade ago to celebrate 100 years, Denon is back with another, sleeker turntable
Review: **Adam Smith** Lab: **Paul Miller**

If I was to give a vinyl enthusiast a choice of high-quality turntables made by Technics, Yamaha, Denon or the team behind Micro Seiki, and then stated that two of the options were direct-drive, I'll wager they would think I was about to take them on a vintage shopping spree. However, it's 2024 and, remarkably, the above selection comprises a range of models that can be bought new today.

The Technics SL-1200 series [*HFN* Nov '17] is back with a vengeance, Yamaha's GT-5000 [*HFN* Oct '20] was a welcome surprise a couple of years ago, and you can buy turntables with Micro Seiki DNA thanks to TechDAS. Now, Denon has thrown its hat back into the ring with the £2299 direct-drive DP-3000NE on test here. This is a modern design albeit with a legacy that stretches back to its 1970s forebear, the DP-3000 motor unit [see boxout, p55].

TORQUE OF THE TOWN

Unlike its '70s namesake, however, the DP-3000NE is an integrated unit. It is supplied as a complete motor, arm and plinth assembly, with its solid MDF chassis finished in an ebony veneer. This is machined out on its underside to take the motor, wiring and associated circuitry [see pic, p57] while the plinth sits on four 'vibration-absorbing' feet that are adjustable for levelling.

The heart of the direct-drive system is a torquey 16-pole, 12-coil motor built to Denon's specification by a Chinese OEM manufacturer. The motor is quartz-locked and has the familiar two-part construction similar to the older Mk2 Technics SL-1200 and the current Thorens TD 124 DD [*HFN* Jul '21], where the magnet ring/rotor is fixed to the underside of the platter.

For the DP-3000NE, the motor drive circuitry uses SVPWM (Space Vector Pulse Width Modulation). This is a development of the standard sinusoidal PWM drive conventionally used to power brushless DC motors, and utilised where fine control is required, such as in CNC machines and cars. Claimed benefits are more torque, better control, and less noise and rotational distortion at the low speeds at which a direct-drive turntable motor operates.

The DP-3000NE's platter, topped by a rubber mat, is made from die-cast aluminium and weighs 2.8kg with its magnet ring. The stainless-steel motor shaft spins on a miniature steel ball bearing; the deck only appears to offer 33/45rpm speeds, but if you hold down the speed button and press Start/Stop at the same time, both speed LEDs illuminate and the result is – *voilà* – 78rpm.

> 'The orchestra and chorus had bite and immediacy'

Familiarity with past Denon glories continues when you look at the tonearm, as it is another highly rated model brought up to date. Designer Ryo Okazeri confirms that the DP-3000NE's arm is intended to be a faithful re-creation of the DA-309, but with the fitment of an armtube damper more akin to that used on the DA-304.

In contrast to the rigid, single-piece armtube designs made famous by manufacturers including Rega and SME, Denon has typically employed a 'lossy' coupling between the back of the tube and the bearing housing. For the DP-3000NE turntable, the armtube is decoupled by a sprung plate and a rubber damper, while a similar arrangement is used for the horizontal bearing. As a result, everything has a certain amount of movement or 'give' that, on first acquaintance, can seem a little unusual. Otherwise, VTA adjustment is offered through an adjustable locking collar, which

RIGHT: Top-down view shows the start/stop button [left] and 33.3/45rpm speed selector [right] – both buttons pressed together select 78rpm. Alloy platter sits within a stylish frame, driven via a 16-pole/12-coil brushless motor

ABOVE: The dark ebony-finished plinth is far slimmer than in early designs – the adjustable 'insulator' feet looking huge in comparison! The S-shaped arm offers 9mm of height adjustment

is a delight to use, and a screw-in auxiliary counterweight means the arm can cope with cartridges up to 26g in bodyweight.

GETTING THE HANG OF IT

For the lightweight aluminium headshell, which also has a damping layer on its underside, Denon provides a natty overhang gauge for easy alignment of your chosen cartridge. However, be aware that this headshell is quite short and has a 'lip' at the front that prevents cartridges from being positioned forward of its end. With some pick-ups, this may hinder alignment so Denon provides plastic shims in its accessory box (along with a good selection of cartridge screws and a screwdriver) to allow long cartridges to sit proud of the headshell and also to further tweak VTA.

Other thoughtful accessories include a true 45rpm adapter that also doubles as a record weight (visible on the rear shot, p57), and a hinged lid shaped to match the contours of the plinth. A mains cable is also provided, plus a high-quality set of interconnects and an earthing lead that appears chunky enough to channel away a direct lightning strike without even getting warm.

SOLID AS A ROCK

With a Clearaudio MC Essence [*HFN* Aug '17] installed and Denon's interconnect plugged into my Yamaha C-5000/M-5000 pre/power amp combination [*HFN* Aug '20], immediate results from the DP-3000NE were highly promising. This turntable served up a rich, enveloping sound with firm, detailed bass and a fluid treble. Rhythmic detail was rock-solid and surface noise and general vinyl background hash was superbly suppressed. Denon's work on the motor drive algorithm has clearly not been in vain, as the DP-3000NE is surefooted and confident in operation.

Sweet and beguiling in terms of treble, the deck took the MC Essence cartridge and traded a little of its ultimate clarity for warmth and liquidity. Cymbals on The Eagles' 'One Of These Nights' from the album of the same name [Asylum Records K53014] had form and realism, but with a slight smoothing of the metallic sheen that one might expect. However, while the DP-3000NE was, on occasion, showing some dynamic reticence – a clue that it wasn't fully revealing its potential – I was reminded that the obvious companion for a flagship Denon turntable is not necessarily a Clearaudio cartridge...

MADE TO MATCH

Swapping over to a Denon DL-103R [*HFN* Jul '09] proved the point as the sparkle of treble returned to the DP-3000NE turntable. Everything at the top-end was now sprightly and crisp, ensuring that the violins on Overture No.1, Act 1 of Mozart's 'Die Zauberflote', performed by the Philharmonia Orchestra and Chorus/Otto Klemperer [EMI SLS912], sounded biting and immediate. The DL-103 cartridge, in all its various guises, can sound unremarkable if it is not in the right arm, but clearly the DP-3000NE with its DA-309-derived tonearm is a natural companion.

Most interesting of all, however, is the way in which the DP-3000NE marshals the midband. There's often a view that direct-drive turntables can lack emotion and sound sterile and 'mechanical'. Ten minutes with the DP-3000NE would disabuse ⟳

ONE DIRECTION

Denon's first direct-drive turntable was the DN-302F in 1970 – a professional model developed for the Japanese broadcaster NHK. This used a sturdy AC motor and boasted a start-up time of 0.2 seconds. The domestic DP-5000 motor unit followed a year later with its instantly familiar 'UFO' styling. This was simplified slightly to form the original DP-3000 of 1972 [pictured here]. Again, this was just a motor unit – in a plinth it became the DP-3500 and with the addition of an arm, the DP-3700K. More integrated units with fully automated operation and servo arm control followed, culminating in the ultimate Denon direct-drive, 1981's DP-100M – a stunning and rare 63kg *tour de force*.

In common with others, Denon embraced digital in the '80s and its analogue turntable development waned. It did spring back in 2010 with the limited edition DPA-100 100th anniversary model, but its full production successor, the DP-1300, was a Japan-only model. The DP-3000NE featured here marks a welcome return for a Denon flagship turntable to the UK.

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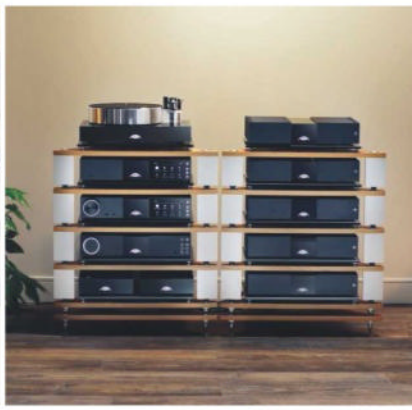

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ABOVE: An additional counterweight screws into the rear of the arm extending its accommodation of cartridges from 4-16g to 14-26g. Otherwise this is a 'plug and go' solution – with detachable headshell – including pre-wired RCA phono outputs

anyone of this notion. I can't help wondering if the unusual pattern of tonearm resonances [see PM's Lab Report, opposite] is having an effect here but the DP-3000NE's midband is otherwise projective, dynamic and forthright in the very best way.

BOLD AS BRASS

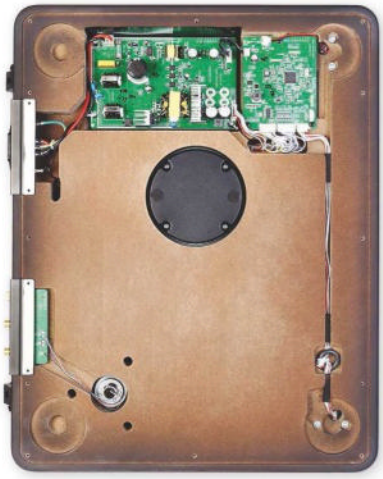
Listening to 'Little Brown Jug', from the Syd Lawrence Orchestra's *Big Band Spectacular* direct-cut LP [Chasing the Dragon VALDC002], I have seldom heard the performance so 'alive'. Rasping brass, thundering drums, crisp leading edges and a resonant bassline all added up to a breathtaking rendition. I had trouble wiping the grin off my face.

Again, but through the deepest bass, the DP-3000NE retains the sense of surefootedness and timing that has long been the preserve of a good direct-drive turntable. It digs deeply but without becoming overblown or bloated. Bass notes start and stop on demand and some tracks even sounded as if they were running a little *fast* thanks to the impeccable sense of security offered by this deck (and, yes, I did double-check that its speed was absolutely spot-on.) Anders Hansson's basslines on Harriet's 'Drop In The Ocean' *[The Outcome*; Bright Star Records 5060955-400770] came across as rounded, rich and precisely paced, guaranteeing the track's sense of groove shone through even as the keyboards, percussion and guitar accompaniment joined in on top.

ALL IN ORDER

On the album's title track, which is a simple vocal piece with minimal instrumentation, Harriet's vocals were clear, lifelike and projected wonderfully out into the room. The echo picked up from the recording studio was almost uncannily realistic. The DP-3000NE doesn't throw images extravagantly wide or into the far distance, instead being content to offer a properly ordered soundstage within the confines of the loudspeakers, and out into the room by a well-judged amount.

This presentation might lack the initial pizzaz of some competitors but, ultimately, it affords better focus on the subtlety of a recording. At the same time, while the DP-3000NE seems a paragon of sophistication with high-quality material, it also proves more than capable of thundering out thumping dance beats, such as 'Padam Padam' from Kylie Minogue's *Tension* LP [BMG 538927931], with heady abandon. A direct-drive turntable with a lack of 'drive' just doesn't seem right – fortunately Denon's DP-3000NE is in top gear all the way.



ABOVE: Inside/underneath showing the universal switchmode PSU [top left], 'Space Vector' PWM motor control [top right] and tonearm base [bottom left]

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Denon's DP-3000NE turntable can carry the company's 'flagship' moniker with pride. At its heart is an innovative direct-drive motor that reaps performance rewards, while styling, fit and finish are first-class and setup is aided by some thoughtful touches. The tonearm has its quirks, which means that cartridge matching is more critical than usual, but get this right and the deck is an absolute winner.

Sound Quality: 85%

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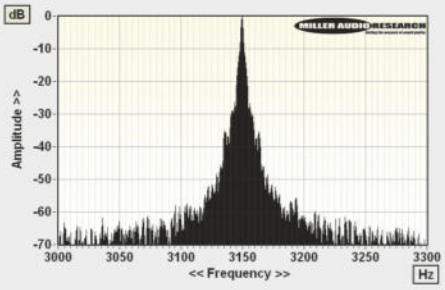
LAB REPORT

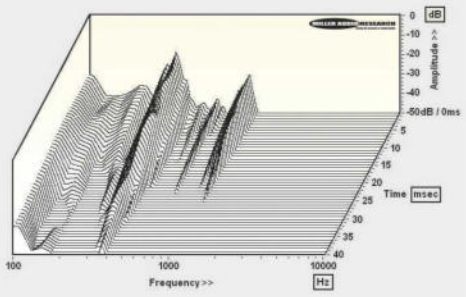
DENON DP-3000NE

Denon's 16-pole, 12-coil brushless DC motor brings the diecast alloy platter up to speed within 1 second, the inertia a claimed 382kg/cm². As anticipated (hoped), speed stability is excellent as illustrated by the sharpness of the main W&F peak [see Graph 1, below]. Absolute speed accuracy is bang on target (within ±0.01%), peak wow is a very low 0.01% and higher-rate flutter comes in at 0.04% courtesy of minor sidebands at ±10Hz and ±15Hz. Spectral analysis reveals no obvious resonances attributable either to the motor or other structural components while the through-spindle rumble comes home at a very low –69.9dB (DIN B-wtd). The heavy rubber mat brings additional damping, reducing the through-groove rumble and noise to just –73.9dB – this is up with the very best decks available and puts paid to any suggestion of 'cogging' noise that might have afflicted some 'AC-driven' 1970/'80s direct-drive decks.

The partnering statically balanced, 9.6in S-shaped tonearm is designed to 'suppress vibration' and, indeed, the combination of its distributed counterweight and lossy coupling of the tube to the main bearing has deferred the main resonance to a very high 360Hz – at the expense of rigidity at the 'cartridge end'. The subsequent resonance at 1.1kHz is either a harmonic or twisting mode. While straight tonearm tubes typically bend in the 60Hz-200Hz region, depending on length, materials and construction, S-shaped arms necessary exhibit a more complex series of bending and torsional modes, so Denon's lightweight tube bucks the trend. Finally, while friction is slightly higher in the vertical plane at 30mg the 'dial up' counterweight is precisely calibrated, over-reading by just 4% (0.96g at 1g and 1.92g at 2g). **PM**



ABOVE: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted ±150Hz, 5Hz per minor division)



ABOVE: Cumulative tonearm resonant decay spectrum, illustrating various bearing, pillar and 'tube' vibration modes spanning 100Hz-10kHz over 40msec

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.33rpm (+0.01%)
Time to audible stabilisation	~1 second
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.01% / 0.04%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	–72.5dB (–73.9dB with weight)
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	–69.9dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	–63.5dB
Power Consumption	4W (3W idle)
Dimensions (WHD, inc. lid) / **Weight**	500x185x394mm / 18.5kg

Two-way reflex-loaded standmount loudspeaker
Made by: International Audio Group, China
Supplied by: Quad Hifi, IAG House, UK
Telephone: 01480 452561
Web: www.quad-hifi.co.uk; www.internationalaudiogroup.com
Price: £1799 (£2499 with stands)

Quad Revela 1

Quad's first new speakers in some seven years feature an evolved version of the ribbon tweeter seen in its 'Corner Horn' of 70 years ago. Now, of course, they come in pairs!
Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

For nearly nine years, I have been listening to Quad's ribbon-hybrid S-1 speaker – the brand's smallest two-way box-type system – as part of my day-to-day desktop set-up. When they were launched, I revelled in the realisation that they were a throwback to Quad's first ever loudspeaker, the Corner Ribbon of 1949 [see PM's boxout, p59], and the all-new Revela 1 tells you that the company's boffins, based in the UK and China, haven't been sitting idle since 2015.

At under £500 per pair, the 285x156x 240mm (hwd) S-1 was a beer budget bargain, and the Revela 1 looks to repeat the experience in much the same way as the floorstanding £3499 Revela 2 updates Quad's S-5 [*HFN* Jan '16]. Admittedly, at £1799 per pair, the Revela 1 is far costlier than was the S-1, but its value, as we will discover, is arguably higher still. I was not prepared for the leap in performance…

WORTH THEIR WEIGHT

For starters, the Revela 1 is substantially larger at 395x246x280mm (hwd) and its 27x60mm 'Quad True Ribbon' is much bigger than the S-1's 12x45mm variant. And, where the S-1 used a 100mm woven Kevlar bass/mid driver, the Revela 1 is fitted with a 165mm 'advanced fibre composite' cone unit called the 'Reveal' (lending the speaker its name) crossing over at 2.9kHz. It features a damped pulp/aramid fibre cone, smoothly attached to rubber surrounds and with care taken to avoid reflection of soundwaves at the boundary [see PM's Lab Report, p61].

While the dimensions immediately tell you that these are manageable standmounts, they are deceptively heavy, the box containing the two weighing just under 25kg. Quad doesn't specify the weight, but I'd guess 11kg each. The bulk can be attributed to the exquisite cabinet, one of the most impressive things about the Revela 1 being the way it looks. It is simply gorgeous, a mix of gloss-lacquered wood veneer inserts and black gloss top, back, bottom, baffle and trim. All edges are rounded – this is a low-diffraction enclosure – giving it an organic mien, and it's a visual treat with or without Quad's charcoal grey grilles, thanks to the drive units being finished to display standards.

I'm not even sure if the photos can do it justice. You really have to see this speaker in the room on a pair of stands to appreciate how luxurious it is, not looking out of place standing next to the sublime Franco Serblin Accordo Goldberg [see p42]. Yes, the Revela 1 delivers that level of pride of ownership and perceived value.

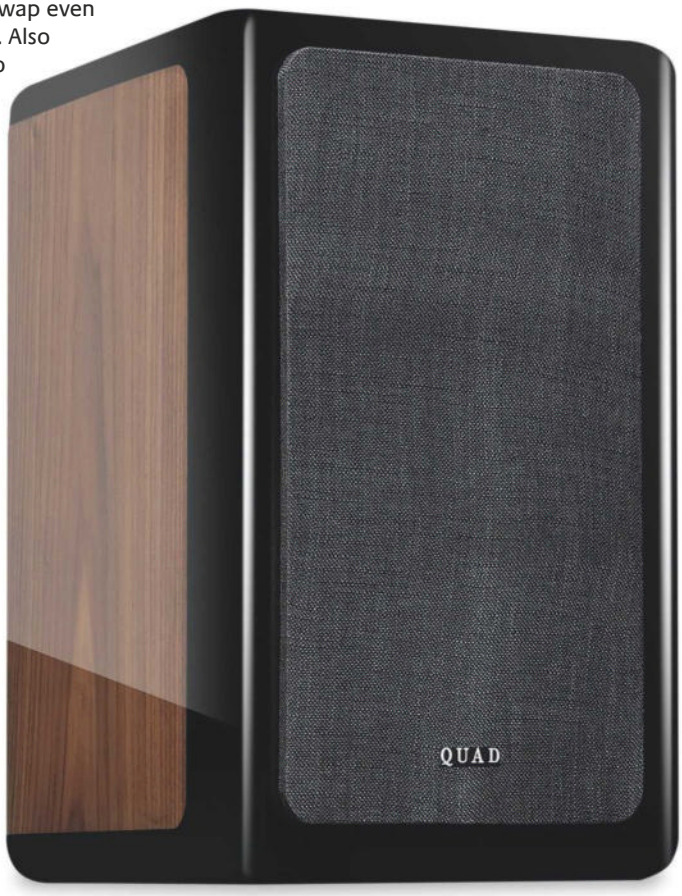
Although Quad offers dedicated stands for an extra £700, they weren't supplied for the review, so I used my references, Music Tools' Tool One (67cm version). Interestingly, as the Revela 1 arrived at the same time as the Accordo Goldberg, I simply replaced the Goldbergs with the Revela 1s, and the swap even involved a similar toe-in. Also shared with the Accordo Goldberg is the need to stand in free space, so don't be fooled into thinking these can work on shelves.

ON TARGET

It's not just that close proximity to the wall would compromise the rear port, for the focus of the ribbon tweeter is such that the Revela 1 needs precise targeting of the listener. However, while they share the Goldbergs' creation of a proscenium within the boundaries of the speaker they do not create much of the soundstage beyond their outer edges, so you will need to experiment with the size and shape of the triangle formed by their positioning relative to the hot seat.

Quad has configured the Revela 1 for single-wiring only, instead of the bi-wiring/bi-amping afforded by the S1. Even if bi-wiring is falling out of favour, much to the chagrin of cable vendors, the chunky multi-way binding posts fitted to the back of the Revela 1 are exceptional, being substantially made to afford plenty of grip when tightening, and able to accept bare wire, spade connectors or banana plugs.

These are simply indicative of how everything about Quad's loudspeaker defies its price category – even the magnetic grille has a luxury feel to it.



RIGHT: The gloss-finished, radiused cabinet comprises 'optimally stressed' and braced panels and is damped with foam and long fibres. Grille is magnetically attached

Most people of an audiophile bent will play the Revela 1 without its grilles, but they will find that if the grilles are needed because of the presence of small children or sharp-clawed pets, the sonic penalty is far from disastrous.

ALL IS REVEALED

Given that I simply swapped the Accordo Goldbergs for the Revela 1s, a further coincidence suggested beneficence from the audio gods: I didn't have to change amps because Quad's new standmount is no more hungry than the pricier Goldbergs, with not dissimilar sensitivity and impedance. Both enjoy being hammered and, my goodness, do these like largescale works and challenges to the woofers.

For those interested in how this reviewer makes his life easier, I also used the same recordings for both auditions, though I am not normally in 'assembly line' mode. This is not to say the Revela 1s are comparable to the Accordo Goldbergs, which at nearly six times the cost, operate on a different plane, but it made me even more aware of the Law of Diminishing Returns. The added refinement of the dearer speaker, as well its undeniably luxurious presence, comes at a cost.

Following the same regimen, like a mini version of the old *Hi-Fi Choice* round-ups, allowed me to streamline the proceedings. I started with The Who's live rendition of 'Baba O'Riley' from *Who's Next/Life House* [Polydor 3585826 CD]. This was a shortcut to hear what the Revela 1 could do with recreating a concert experience, and the size and scale of the performance were so imposing that I was yet again assured that sometimes size *doesn't* matter at all.

Of course, live Who means bombast, but it wasn't the way the Revela 1 went loud so much as how the speakers opened up spatially, even if they never quite disappeared completely from the audio picture. On some recordings, especially studio-assembled works where there is heightened, almost exaggerated instrument positioning, closing one's eyes doesn't make their location undetectable. This isn't a deal-breaker, so much as an exhortation that they should be sited with the same care as you might apply to more esoteric and demanding loudspeakers.

> 'I still mourn for Apogee's Scintilla full-range ribbon'

LISTEN UP

What Quad's Revela 1 begs from the outset (and I wonder if this is simply inherent in moderately hungry/moderately sensitive designs) was a need to be worked hard. They sound of their best when you crank up the levels, which immediately precludes them from being used for background music. The Revela 1 is a speaker for music lovers of the old school, who actually sit and listen. This trait applies even to minimalist or quiet pieces, such as 'Dirty Work' from Steely

BELOW: Seen atop Quad's custom stands, the Revela 1 hosts a 27x60mm ribbon tweeter [see boxout, below] plus a 165mm 'Reveal' bass/mid driver with a damped pulp/aramid fibre cone

REAL RIBBONS

Designed in 1949 by Peter Walker of the Acoustical Manufacturing Co. (latterly Quad), some 600 Corner Ribbon 'hybrid' speakers were built over the next six years with owners subsequently searching for a second enclosure to fulfil the dream of stereo sound in the late 1950s. Peter was latterly quoted as saying his Corner speaker design 'Had a big woofer for bass and a ribbon for highs. It gave a lot of boom and *sssss*, you know, it sounded hi-fi, but didn't sound very natural. Still, it gave the people what they wanted'. In practice the 'boom' was offered by a labyrinth/reflex-loaded 12in twin-cone Goodmans Axiom 150 bass/mid driver while the sizzle issued from a horn-loaded ½in-wide corrugated aluminium strip positioned between two pole-pieces.

For matching with amplifiers of the day, the 'short-circuit' ribbon was transformer coupled, as is Quad's modern variant, albeit one offering a wider bandwidth and lower distortion. Moreover, the latest ribbon is, in fact, a laminate of aluminium foil and polyester, improving both power handling and damping, just as the modern neodymium magnets significantly improve sensitivity. Like all true ribbons the foil strip is driven uniformly over its entire surface while also profiting from vanishingly low inertia. With the benefit of hindsight, it's clear to see the direct line in this thinking to the full-range electrostatic loudspeaker first demonstrated by Peter Walker in 1956. PM

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Our new 3510 Series Integrated Amplifier is a masterclass in musicality and power. With 110w RMS, six line inputs and the option to fit a MC or MM phono module or even a plug in DAC, it redefines what is possible in one box amplification. To find out more about our exciting new 3510 Series which also includes a pre-amp as well as power amplifiers, visit **exposurehifi.com** today.

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LEFT: The Revela 1's two-way 'phase-compensated Acoustic Butterworth' crossover does not support bi-amping or bi-wiring – hence the single 4mm cable binding posts. The large reflex port includes longitudinal splines to smooth the airflow at low bass frequencies

Dan's *Can't Buy A Thrill* [Analogue Productions CAPP134SA SACD].

For those of you unfamiliar with the track, it features a Jerome Richardson sax solo so vivid, so spotlighted, that it has been a demo favourite for a half-century. Here the tweeter reminded me of why I still mourn the departure of the Apogee Scintilla full-range ribbon [*HFN* Sep '85 & Jan '11]. Detail was such that one could hear the sax reed, but that level of forensic insight was secondary when compared to the presence of the entire instrument in three dimensions. And *that* needed a turn of the volume control.

GRACE AND IMPACT

There was no hint of break-up, clipping or compression, and yet the excessive playback levels did not belie the fact that the song is gentle, sorrowful and demanding of refinement. If an excess of decibels suggests a dearth of finesse, the Revela 1 dismisses that notion with aplomb. It's telling you that even with a budget just above entry-level, you can savour grace and impact at the same time. It's a heady combination, and not one I anticipate of a loudspeaker costing half the price of a bottle of Petrus.

But this isn't all about the ribbon. The Revela 1's woofer is a game-changer. The opening bongo patterns on Steely Dan's 'Do It Again' were as rich and real as one could require if veracity matters. And once more these speakers were able to present an instrument in the listening space with convincing dimensions, the right amount of attack and decay, and freedom of artifice – no aggravating dryness, in this case.

As my ultimate arbiter, I always listen to something from outside my usual diet and comfort zone. So gripping is the performance of Quad's Revela 1 – bang for the buck aside – that I actually sat through the whole of Disturbed's (very) heavy metal *Immortalized* [Reprise 936249262-6 CD] before track 11, the American band's astounding take on 'The Sound Of Silence'. Yes, I immersed myself in an entire disc's worth of sandpaper vocals and ferocious instrumental ammunition, but I still left it awestruck.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

If there are any issues with Quad's Revela 1, it's that it is *too* good. The past couple of years have shown the market is awash with amazing speakers at all price points, but the Revela 1 doesn't just excel at £1799: if I hadn't known the price, the sound and build would have had me guessing £5000. Grab a pair before Quad figures out they're underpriced. Even with nine months to go, this is my product of 2024.

Sound Quality: 89%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

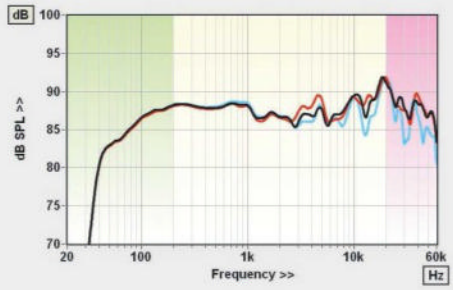
PM

LAB REPORT

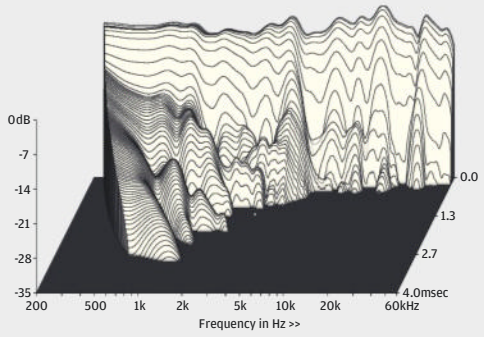
QUAD REVELA 1

Quad is realistic in its claims for the Revela 1 – neither over-rating its sensitivity (86dB/2.83V/1m) or bass extension (40Hz re. –6dB). We'll cover off the detail below, but the Revela 1 is arguably a little tougher to drive than Quad's 6ohm nominal might suggest as the '4.1ohm minimum' is closer to 3.6ohm/221Hz in practice where the sub-100Hz phase angles of +44°/–55° also contribute to a 1.7ohm/130Hz EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance). Above the 2.9kHz crossover, the ribbon tweeter [see boxout, p59] never drops below 6.6ohm (EPDR is >3.5ohm) so the Revela 1 is not a mean HF load for the amplifier. The forward response shows a rise to 20kHz once the ribbon takes over [see Graph 1], offsetting the falling power response of the ribbon due to its reduced vertical dispersion. The latter largely accounts for the response errors of ±3.3dB and ±2.9dB, respectively, and the 1.6dB pair matching, but note the extension of the ribbon out to 60kHz [–6dB re. 10kHz, pink shaded area]. The grille, meanwhile, is best left off for optimal listening [blue trace, Graph 1].

As is also clear from the response plot, the Revela 1 enjoys a far higher 88.2dB/1kHz sensitivity than claimed (or 87.3dB from 500Hz-8kHz) while distortion is good to within ~0.4% from 300Hz-20kHz (re. 90dB/1m). Moreover the relatively 'clean' CSD waterfall [see Graph 2, below] shows no severe breakup modes associated with either driver. The 165mm fibre composite bass/mid unit works over a 67Hz-1.8kHz (–6dB) bandwidth, and with the keenly tuned 40Hz port – also free of spurious output – achieves a very creditable 44Hz bass extension (–6dB re. 200Hz). Overall, the Revela 1 is a very fine all-rounder. **PM**



ABOVE: Response inc. nearfield summed driver/port [green], freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V [yellow], ultrasonic [pink]. Left, black; right, red; w grille, blue



ABOVE: The compact cabinet is well damped while only low-level modes are seen from mid and ribbon

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V – 1kHz/Mean/IEC)	88.2dB / 87.3dB / 86.0dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	3.56ohm @ 221Hz 27.5ohm @ 73Hz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	–55° @ 92Hz +48° @ 812Hz
Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz–20kHz)	1.6dB/ ±3.3dB/±2.9dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	44Hz / 60.1kHz/60.5kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.1% / 0.25% / 0.35%
Dimensions (HWD) / **Weight** (each)	395x246x280mm / 11kg

Integrated tube amplifier. Rated at 40W/8ohm
Made by: Canor, spol. s r.o., Slovakia
Supplied by: Signature Audio Systems, UK
Telephone: 07738 007776
Web: www.canor-audio.com; www.signaturesystems.co.uk
Price: £7500

Canor Audio Virtus I2

This Slovakian design and production facility takes pride in its tube selection, in-house PCB 'milling' and other innovations. Here's the new flagship 'Premium Line' integrated

Review: **Jamie Biesemans** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Canor Audio, based in Slovakia, is certainly not the most famous of hi-fi brands, but has been around for longer than many will realise. And, cunningly, it sidesteps the minefield of online rage surrounding tube versus solid-state amplification by manufacturing hybrid amps, a solid-state design, and fully fledged tube products. Canor is clearly smart enough to hedge its bets.

Still, at its heart Canor considers itself 'a tube specialist', albeit a pragmatic one which realises that sometimes other designs can offer more bang for the buck. For example, its forthcoming Virtus A3 all-in-one, designed by hi-fi guru John Westlake, is a tube/transistor hybrid. The Virtus I2 here, however, is an all-analogue integrated amplifier that wholeheartedly embraces tubes while also claiming Class A operation [see PM's boxout, p63].

MONOBLOCK POTENTIAL

Priced at £7500, the Virtus I2 is a new addition to Canor's 'Premium Line', and a step up from the AI 1.10 launched in 2019. Both that older model and the Virtus I2 employ tried-and-tested KT88 tubes, here in switchable ultralinear (UL) and triode modes for a rated 2x40W and 2x20W, respectively. In reality it's a bit less [see PM's Lab Report, p65] while the choice of mode will come down to both listener preference – triode mode has a reputation for a sweeter and more 'organic' sound – and loudspeaker sensitivity.

Canor also allows pairs of its Virtus I2s to be configured as monoblocks, an option that will both drive the chill from your listening room and sidestep the need for a separate preamp. In this dual-mono set-up one of the two Virtus I2s acts as a master and controls the second unit, making for a more affordable way to upgrade your set-up (if from the off you want to use two monoblocks, Canor sells the £12,000 'Reference Line' Virtus M1).

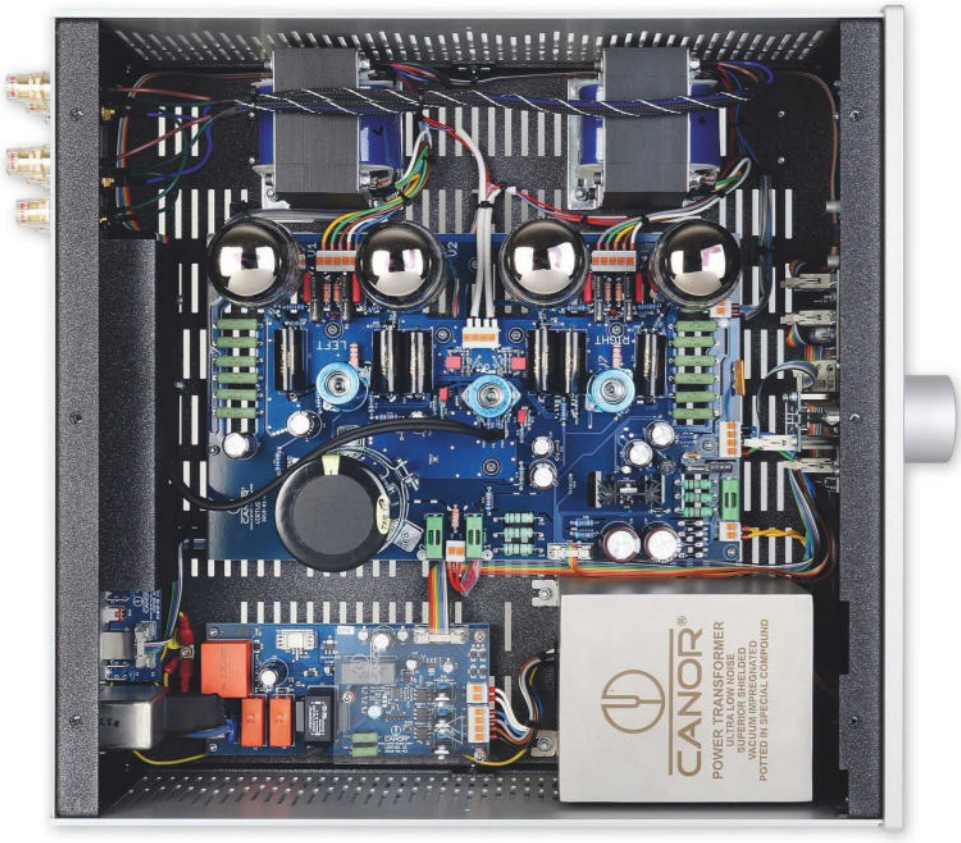
MAKING MUSIC

As witnessed when I visited Canor's facilities in the quaint town of Prešov last July, it manufactures nearly everything in-house. It boasts a largescale anodising plant, plus the tooling needed for creating the hefty aluminium housings the company employs, and extensive assembly lines dedicated to OEM work for other manufacturers – something Canor has been doing for decades [*HFN* Nov '22].

> 'The Virtus I2 deftly portrayed every succinctly placed lick'

The Virtus I2 puts its manufacturing skill on show. There are artful cut-outs on the top plate, and a brushed fascia that's dissected by a black 'window' running across its full width. This detail is par for the course for Canor, as is the amplifier's excellent build and finish. One advantage of the consistent design language across all its products is that it's easy to mix and match them in a system, even if you complement the Virtus I2 with, for example, a lower-tier ('Performance Line') phono stage or DAC.

Canor's engineering prowess is apparent on the amp's interior too, not only with the tidy production [see inside shot, below] but also with its novel 'Canor Milling Technology' (CMT). Here patterns are cut from the PCB, removing spare areas of substrate that might otherwise



RIGHT: A pair of 12AT7s and single 12AX7 triodes [in blue cans] form the input, line-driver/phase-splitter feeding matched pairs of KT88s [centre/top]. The PSU transformer [bottom right] is potted in resin and fully screened, unlike the L/R output coupling transformers [top]

LEFT: Canor's bold dot-matrix display is unmissable at any distance! The large rotary governs a high-quality stepped attenuator while, less visible, small push buttons cater for input, mute, display dimming and UL/triode mode

contribute added capacitance between adjacent copper tracks. It's rather like point-to-point wiring without, er, the wiring, and is also where Canor's 'air dielectric' claim comes into being.

TANGERINE DREAM

The company loves the colour orange, saying 'it reminds us of the glow of tubes'. On the Virtus I2, there's the orange glow that's emitted around the large volume dial, this governing a precision stepped attenuator; the orange-lit logo just below; and Canor's familiar orange dot-matrix display. You won't need glasses to read this, as its large type is probably legible even to a passer-by looking in through your window. The display looks neat and shows a fair amount of useful info, but if you find it overwhelming the lighting can be dimmed or turned off entirely.

The Virtus I2's remote [see p65] feels as luxurious as the amplifier itself, which is refreshing as too often the opulence of high-end kit is let down by a shoddy parts-bin handset. In this case you get a simple but effective device, the only thing missing being a button to switch the unit between triode and UL modes, that facility being left on the amplifier itself.

To prevent damage in transit, the large KT88 tubes are packed separately and must be loaded, in pair-matched order, into the tube bases under the lid. Canor supplies the necessary hardware, or you could ask your dealer to oblige. For future reference each tube is also tested and 'fingerprinted' in detail, allowing close-matched replacements to be offered when necessary. In the meantime, Canor guarantees all its tubes for two years.

SWEET EMOTION

There's something beguiling about the sound of Canor's amps, and particularly the Virtus I2. There's the exciting ability to rapidly ramp up power and react to dynamic shifts in music, but also a smooth, naturally flowing quality that adds emotional heft. Of course, being a tube design you can't just switch it on and press play. The Virtus I2 is fitted with a bespoke pre-heating and cooldown circuit, to extend tube life, and this means waiting a minute or two before it can be used. This is hardly unusual or arduous, and in any case, it gave my partnering T+A DAC200 [*HFN* May '22] and iFi Audio NEO Stream digital transport [*HFN* Mar '23] time to boot up.

On this amp, triode operation adds some airiness, which helps to expand the soundstage and imaging, and during my auditioning it was the mode I tended to favour. Also notable is the volume control, with any 1dB change delivered by a satisfying click. It's suggested to ensure improved channel balance and separation, which probably aided the Virtus I2's ability to create a brilliantly defined soundstage with excellent placement of instruments. Generally, a volume control of this quality is only found on more expensive designs.

Canor's amplifier proved an agreeable match for my Focal Sopra N°2 floorstanders [*HFN* Sep '15], but I was also very satisfied when using it to power Canton's new Reference 7 towers. Of course, even a KT88-based amp is far from a powerhouse and both of these speakers will require more if you want to drive them to concert levels. That said, I would be hard pressed to call the Virtus I2 feeble – 'Healing', the second track on German singer/songwriter Josin's *In The Blank Space* [DD031CD; CD], sounded full of body and mass.

CLASS A ALL THE WAY?

While the Virtus I2 may not *quite* achieve the rating hoped for by Canor [see Lab Report, p65], the brand is still clear that the amplifier remains operationally in 'Class A'. In practice a pair of KT88s/6550s will typically achieve 50W/8ohm in push-pull/UL guise [*HFN* Nov '23 & Oct '22] but can, if pushed hard, deliver closer to 100W [*HFN* Aug '21]. But Canor does not advocate 'tube rolling' – its use of moderate plate current with a proprietary auto-bias regime confirms this is a 'plug and play/sit back and listen' solution. Tweakers look elsewhere! Meanwhile, as the definition of 'Class A' in tube circuits is often contested, I'm tempted to refer to the RCA's (Radio Corporation of America) *Receiving Tube Manual*, published back in 1947. Buried in this literary treasure is a section that explains Class A operation as a configuration where 'the grid bias and alternating grid voltages are such that the plate current ... flows at all times'.

While single-ended tube stages [*HFN* Dec '23] are fundamentally Class A in operation, Canor can remain faithful to the RCA's definition for *push-pull* Class A by idling the tubes midway between cut-off (low) and full saturation (high). Here audio current still swings through both the 'negative' and 'positive' push-pull tubes, increasing in one tube above the idle bias up to the point of saturation while simultaneously decreasing in the other, but avoiding cut-off. The two phases are summed in the output transformer [see pic, p62], also suppressing even-order distortions and noise. Strictly, a Class A amp's idle power consumption will be high and virtually unchanged regardless of amplifier output but, like most, the Virtus I2 idles 'hot' (220W, in this instance) but draws higher (250W) at full output. Class A or not, the I2 remains very inefficient as its KT88s continue to dissipate a high current even if there is no input signal. PM

CADENZA

The Cadenza Series of high-end Moving Coil (MC) cartridges allow you to get the most from your vinyl records. By carefully implementing cobalt-iron pole pieces, using new improved winding processes on the armature, and employing an extruded aluminium housing - amongst other changes - the Cadenza Series is able to out-perform all those that came before it.

The name *Cadenza* comes from the Italian word for cadence, which refers to a soloist during an orchestra performance where they play alone in an elaborate manner. It therefore seemed fitting that such a capable and nuanced cartridge series should use the same name.

Like other modern ranges, the Cadenza Series is structured in Ortofon's preferred colour-tier nomenclature; so there are Red, Blue, Bronze, and Black variants available to suit varying budgets and tastes.

Red

This MC cartridge and introduction to the series features a Nude Fine Line stylus which delivers open, dynamic sound with a touch of warmth.

Blue

Featuring much greater dynamics and resolution, the sound is more open and reproduces more accurate details thanks to the Nude FG 70 stylus.

Bronze

A step up in the range, this cartridge boasts a Replicant 100 stylus to produce stereo imaging capabilities that illuminate the farthest corners of the soundstage.

Black

Flagship of the range, the Cadenza Black is simply the best and features a Nude Shibata stylus which guarantees amazing tonal neutrality, dynamics and purity of sound.

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ABOVE: Four line ins and one fixed line out on RCAs are joined by balanced XLR ins for use in mono mode. The 4mm speaker terminals are routed via 8 and 4ohm taps

This song feels like a nod to the trip-hop genre of Massive Attack and Tricky, with a spacious production and weighty, sluggish beats. It has a meditative aspect that suited the Virtus I2, as the amp's warm but also slightly forward character created an encircling listen and delivered the synth notes with plenty of texture. This sonic signature was even more apparent during 'Burning (For A New Start)', where the reverb-heavy soundscape was perfectly matched to the Virtus I2's rich balance.

SONGS OF PRAISE

It's electrifying with vocals too. Josin's singing across *In The Blank Space*, but also her appearance on 'The Bottom Line' on Ólafur Arnald's *Sunrise Session II* EP [Mercury Classics 602445599622; 96kHz/24-bit], was portrayed with wonderful delicacy. The latter was one of those tracks where the amplifier's triode mode proved alluring, even if the music sometimes lost the dynamic impact delivered in UL mode.

There's also nothing 'slow' about this Canor integrated, as illustrated by its portrayal of Yussef Dayes' jazz drumming on his album *Black Classical Music* [Brownswood Recordings; 48kHz/24-bit download]. 'Afro Cubanism' will be a favourite of anyone who believes a drum kit is the main act in all music, and the Virtus I2 deftly portrayed every succinctly placed lick. Meanwhile, its handling of the supporting instruments – including synthesiser and trumpet – will satiate those music enthusiasts with a more balanced view.

LEFT: Canor's slim but rugged alloy remote includes basic transport functions for the partnering CD player [*HFN* Apr '21] alongside input select, volume and mute for the amp

The amp's dexterity was also on show during 'Raisins Under The Sun', where the fluidity of the basslines made for an exhilarating listen. Even if Canor's amp isn't delivering the ultimate in resolution, which jazz fans who like to savour every little detail might prefer, it countered with a smoothness that brought the performance closer to a jazz club vibe than a recording studio.

GOOD TIMES

Pairing the Virtus I2 with a Pro-Ject X2 B turntable and Phono Box S3 B phono stage [*HFN* Sep '22] to create a fully analogue system certainly wasn't a bad move. Indeed, from the mainstream fare of Lorde's *Melodrama* [Republic Records B0026618-01], which was better in the punchier UL mode, to the capricious piano playing of Jef Neve on *One* [Universal Music Belgium 4703679], the Virtus I2 impressed with its versatility, and always injected just the right amount of tube 'goodness' to guarantee an enveloping – and fun – listen.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Technical excellence doesn't always translate to engaging listening, but the Virtus I2 proves Canor knows how to design and build an amplifier with universal appeal. Employing some tech tricks normally found on more rarefied gear, it still offers the smooth, warm sound many tube lovers demand. Moreover, the monoblock upgrade will accommodate a move to more challenging loudspeakers.

Sound Quality: 87%

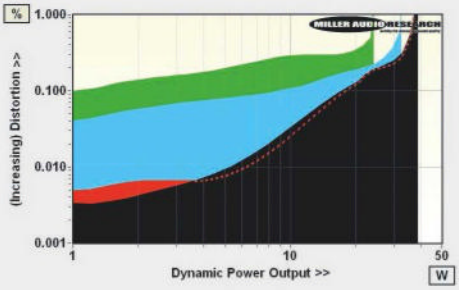
0 - - - - - - - - 100

LAB REPORT

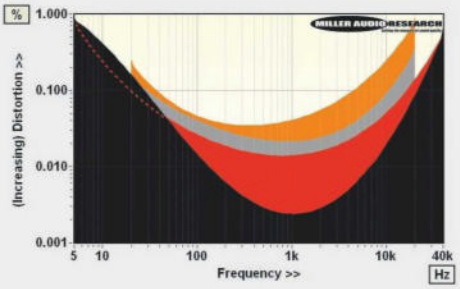
CANOR AUDIO VIRTUS I2

While Canor suggests that its two pairs of KT88s will deliver 2x40W, in practice the maximum output is 2x35W into 8 or 4ohm via the 8 and 4ohm taps, respectively, at 1% THD. Relaxing the test conditions to 5% THD only yields 2x37W, unlike some lower-feedback tube amps where distortion and power increase hand-in-hand. Under dynamic conditions there's a little extra headroom to support 37W/8ohm (via the 8ohm tap), 37W/4ohm (via the 4ohm tap), and 32W/2ohm and 24W/1ohm also via the 4ohm tap [see Graph 1, below]. With a maximum current delivery of 4.9A (10msec/1ohm at <1% THD) the Virtus I2 is clearly best partnered with sensitive speakers of >4ohm impedance. Power in Triode mode is typically half that in UL, and the Virtus I2 remains 'on trend' with 2x19W into 8 and 4ohm.

Distortion *can* be lower in Triode mode, but not always, as the amplifier achieves a minimum midband figure of 0.0025% in UL and 0.013% in Triode mode [all re. 1W/8ohm – see Graph 2 below]. The generalised increase at low frequencies is a function of the output transformers and is expected, as is the increase to ~0.1%/20kHz. Canor's output transformers, and feedback, ensure a very uniform 0.6-0.63ohm output impedance and extended response that is flat to within ±0.25dB from a remarkable 5Hz-100kHz. The 'real life' amp/speaker response will be influenced by the swings in speaker impedance but the Virtus I2 is generally less susceptible than most tube amps here. Overall gain is a sensibly moderate +31dB (so ~0.5V input will raise the full 35W output) and noise is very low, leading to a very wide 93dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW) – this is top-end solid-state territory! **PM**



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max. current is 4.9A



ABOVE: Distortion versus frequency versus power output (1W/8ohm, Ultralinear, black; Triode, red) and (10W/8ohm, Ultralinear, grey; Triode, orange)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	35W/19W / 35W/19W (UL/Tr)
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	37W / 37W / 32W / 24W
Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz/100kHz)	0.605-0.625ohm / 2.19ohm
Frequency resp. (20Hz–20kHz/100kHz)	+0.15dB to –0.0dB / +0.25dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/35W)	80mV / 500mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/35W)	92.9dB / 108.3dB
Dist. (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm, UL/Tri)	0.021-0.38% / 0.065-0.39%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	220W / 250W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD, with ears) / **Weight**	435x170x485mm / 26kg

Network streamer/DAC
Made by: International Audio Group, China
Supplied by: IAG Ltd, Cambs
Telephone: 01480 447700
Web: www.audiolab.co.uk
Price: £2499

Audiolab 9000N

The third and final component in Audiolab's three-strong 9000 series has landed – an app-driven network DAC with balanced outs. But what, if any, is the Lumin connection? Review: **Mark Craven** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Arriving to crown Audiolab's top-flight 9000 series, which launched with the 9000A integrated amplifier and 9000CDT CD transport [*HFN* Aug '23], the 9000N is arguably the most intriguing model in the range. This streaming DAC, priced at £2499, and styled to match, marks a point of departure for the brand as its association with DTS Play-Fi is cut in favour of a new streaming platform and app.

Audiolab's website doesn't shout much about the change, which is understandable as its DTS-equipped 6000N Play and 7000N Play models are still current. Instead, it simply discusses the 9000N's 'incredibly capable and equally stable streaming platform' and a new 9000N-specific app, free for iOS and Android [see boxout, p67]. However, it doesn't mention that this app is a 'reskinned' version of that used to drive specialist brand Lumin's network hardware.

INSIDE STORY

Naturally, this has kicked up quite a stir in some parts of the online hi-fi community – Lumin (and the app) being well regarded – and has led to some declaring that the 9000N is a 'Lumin inside'. Neither company is saying any such thing, of course (the word 'Lumin' is entirely absent from Audiolab's website), and the more prosaic truth is that the 9000N partners an OEM streaming module developed by Lumin's Hong Kong-based parent company, Pixel Magic, with Audiolab's own (digital and analogue) hardware design.

The newly sourced module brings with it streaming service integration (including the hi-res Qobuz and Tidal platforms), TuneIn Internet radio, and UPnP playback, with file handling to 768kHz PCM and DSD512, plus MQA decoding. Furthermore, a firmware update that may be live by the time you read this will bring Roon Ready certification. Apple AirPlay 2, Tidal Connect and Spotify Connect are also present for streaming outside of Audiolab's app.

The 9000N's inputs, beyond Wi-Fi/Ethernet and 12V triggers, are a USB-A port for connection of external drives and USB-B to connect to a PC. That's your lot, so perhaps Audiolab has missed a trick here by not including any coaxial/optical inputs to pair the 9000N with the 9000CDT transport. Anyone opting for a full 9000 series 'stack' would need to route the 9000CDT into the DAC stage of the 9000A amplifier. In practice, both the 9000A and 9000N feature the same ES9038PRO DAC, with its range of digital filters [see PM's Lab report, p69], and while the 9000N has coaxial/optical outputs to passthrough PCM (to 192kHz and non-decoded MQA), the 9000A is arguably that bit better equipped with its BT functionality. The integrated amp also has a pre/power mode that bypasses its volume control, should you want make use of the 9000N's variable output. Otherwise the 9000N/9000A's balanced XLR connections will be most tempting for audiophiles.

> 'His 2019 album is weird stuff, but mesmerising'

RIGHT ON TRACK

In either its black or silver finish, the slender 9000N looks agreeably swish, but turn it on and it looks even more striking thanks to the same 4.3in LCD display that graces Audiolab's other 9000 series components. This is certainly one of the better displays in the business, being crisp, colourful, well-organised in terms of its layout and very customisable. For example, there are six different themes, two showcasing 'virtual' analogue or digital VU meters, and one that shows only album artwork and track title.

You will also need to use this display – either in conjunction with the 9000N's remote control or front panel rotary – to make tweaks to settings such as channel

RIGHT: Linear PSU [right] has regulation [centre] for separate XMOS-based USB board [top left], Linux-based Ethernet and USB storage solution [top centre] and audio stage with ES9038PRO DAC and OP275G op-amps [top centre]

balance, filter selection, PCM upsampling (to 384kHz) and display brightness, as these aren't adjustable via the app.

Audiolab is also keen to point out that its 9000N can work entirely over Wi-Fi, so offers a WPS button on the unit's rear to bring a level of automation to the setup process. However, whether down to the 9000N or my own WPS router, I couldn't get this to work successfully, so instead of opting for a more time-consuming manual Wi-Fi setup, I went straight for an Ethernet connection. Hard-wired network solutions are typically the choice of Wi-Fi-weary audiophiles anyway [see p75]...

DOWN TO DETAIL

Although styled to complement Audiolab's 9000A, the 9000N can, of course, integrate into any contemporary set-up so for my auditioning I used it in variable output mode into a Primare A35.2 power amplifier [*HFN* Dec '19] and B&W 705 Signature standmounts. This felt like a very 'modern' system, with no avenue for CD or vinyl playback, but the performance and usability of Audiolab's networked DAC proved more than a useful antidote. It offers a clear, crisp, detailed presentation of your digital music library, and not without alluring musicality.

For example, Led Zeppelin's 'Since I've Been Loving You' [*Led Zeppelin III (Deluxe Edition)*; Atlantic Records 96kHz/24-bit] was delivered with succinct detail to the opening guitar, followed by an impressive dynamic surge as Jimmy Page flicks his amp to overdrive, but also an inviting, supple side to the track's organ playing. Add in John Bonham's drumming and Robert Plant's anguished vocals and there's a lot going on – all of it presented with a flourish as the 9000N spread out the performers.

'We All Die Young', from American glam metal also-rans Steelheart [*Wait*; Z Records 44.1kHz/16-bit], is less complicated, and more obviously 'studio-bound' in its production. Gone was the as-live, reverberant feel of the Zeppelin piece, replaced by a sharper, more aggressive sound. Here the 9000N put focus on singer Miljenko Matijevic's throaty (but highly impressive) vocals and showed no interest in tempering the snarling drive of the chorus. This is theatrical, heart-on-sleeve rock, and it sounded like it.

ABOVE: Seen here in matt black livery, two-tone silver is also an option. The click/stop Select rotary scrolls between USB and network inputs, and navigates the menu via a 4.3in LC display

FILTER FINESSE

The streamer's digital filter selection brings with it the usual caveat – your time is arguably better spent enjoying your music than used on A/B comparisons – but I did form a preference for the DAC's Linear Phase (Slow Roll-Off) setting, as this added a *soupçon* more bass weight and body to some tracks. For example, the rhythm section on The Allman Brothers' 'Ramblin' Man', streamed in 192kHz/24-bit via Tidal [*Brothers And Sisters*; Capricorn Records], felt that bit more robust. Note that this is actually the 9000N's default filter (but second on its scrollable list), whereas PCM upsampling (located in the unit's MQA Decoding menu) is switched off. The latter brought marginal gains to playback of CD-resolution files, ⇨

AUDIOLAB APP

The 9000N's Pixel Magic-designed app and streaming platform gives it a leg-up over Audiolab's other network audio products – DTS Play-Fi, which you'll also find on all manner of hardware including soundbars, televisions and AV receivers, is less 'specialist'. The app will also be familiar to some, as outside of a red-and-black colour scheme to complement that of the 9000N's LCD display (there are no other 'theme' options), its settings and functionality are akin to that of the Lumin app [*HFN* Jul '20]. This includes the size of its text and an interface that's more suited to a tablet (or M1 Mac) than a smartphone.

Music can be played from the Qobuz, Tidal and Spotify platforms, online radio, network shares, and connected USB storage. Here the app impresses with responsive operation, file type/sample rate info and fullscreen album artwork presentation at the touch of a finger. Playlist management, up to 2000 tracks, is also excellent, with the 9000N app making editing and track addition quick and intuitive. Arguably less easy to get to grips with are the app's wider settings, including various options to alter its presentation, as the labelling isn't always obvious – it's therefore a good job that Audiolab has made an online user guide available.

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ABOVE: Wired and wireless Ethernet, USB-B (computer) and USB-A (external drive) inputs are good to 768kHz/DSD512 and are joined by optical/coaxial digital outputs (192kHz/24-bit) plus single-ended (RCA) and balanced (XLR) analogue outputs

but direct comparisons are made more awkward by a pause in output once a change is executed, and the track reverting to its beginning.

CROWD PLEASER

On the subject of bass, I'm annoyed I've only recently discovered the work of Serbian bassist Nenad Vasilić, and specifically his 2019 album *Bass Room* [Galileo Music; 44.1kHz/16-bit], where the tracks feature his playing (analogue or electric) and nothing else. It's weird stuff, but mesmerising with it, and gave the 9000N the opportunity to show off its transient ability and deft handling of low octaves. 'Bass Drops', where Vasilić uses his double bass to conjure images of falling rain (I think), enjoyed a wonderful tone and life-like attack and decay.

Another sparse piece, Ry Cooder's 'Theme From Southern Comfort' [*The Ry Cooder Anthology…*; Rhino Records 44.1kHz/16-bit], was equally inviting, the 9000N again shining a light on small details, such as the background hand percussion, and Cooder's slightly off-beat playing.

But just as this streaming DAC has a performance that suits attentive listening, it's not adverse to more 'crowd-pleasing' material. 'Back To December', from Taylor Swift's *Speak Now (Taylor's Version)* re-release [Republic Records 44.1kHz/24-bit], carried tremendous weight to its keyboard backing and sparkle to the acoustic guitar and vocals. There's nothing particularly adventurous about the staging or presentation, but that left the 9000N to just get on with ensuring it sounded poppy and polished.

Meanwhile, Ella Mai's 'Trip' from the album of the same name [Interscope 44.1kHz/24-bit], which begins with just her vocal and piano chords, but then morphs into glitzy R&B with deep, electronic bass, sounded as clean as a whistle despite the overwrought production. Each of these pieces got my foot – both feet – firmly tapping.

LEFT: Audiolab's system remote caters for the 9000N's input, volume and configuration menu alongside all the functions of the partnering 9000CDT and 9000A CD/amp

PULL FACTOR

At the other end of the spectrum, the 9000N's open, crystal-clear rendition of Lionel Ritchie and Diana Ross's 24 Carat ballad 'Endless Love' from the compilation album *Back To Front* [Motown 192kHz/24-bit] sent my heart racing, such was the emotional pull of their soaring harmonies. Audiolab's range-topping network player/DAC lets the music fly, unfettered, whichever genre.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Audiolab has rounded out its premium 9000 series with a streamer/DAC of real charm. The modern-looking hardware design, plus excellent display and app, appeal from the off, and its performance is assured – music of any flavour is in its wheelhouse thanks to a clear, detailed and unfussy presentation. A minor niggle? Stack the 9000N with its amp and CD siblings and you'll end up with two 'identical' DACs!

Sound Quality: 87%

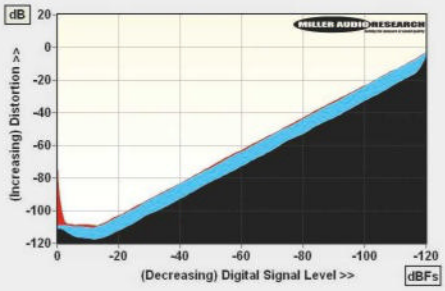
0 - - - - - - - - 100

LAB REPORT

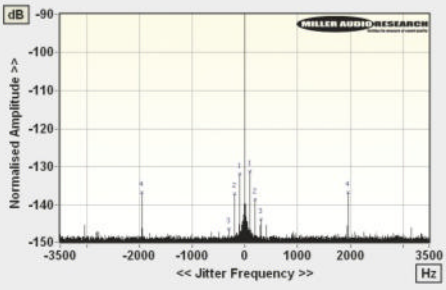
AUDIOLAB 9000N

As with the ES9038PRO-based digital section of the partnering 9000A amplifier [*HFN* Aug '23] the 9000N also offers a choice of five digital filters although these are only enabled when the 'upsampling' option is switched off. With 352.8kHz/384kHz 'upsampling' on, the 9000N defaults to a gentle minimum phase filter offering a –0.4dB/20kHz, –9.6dB/45kHz and –14.8dB/90kHz roll-off with 48kHz, 96kHz and 192kHz inputs, respectively. Jitter is fabulously low at <18psec (PSU-induced) with 24-bit inputs regardless of whether 'upsampling' is engaged or not [see Graph 2, below]. The five digital filters include fast and slow roll-off linear and minimum phase types plus a fast roll-off mixed/hybrid option, these offering responses of –0.0dB, –3.5dB, –0.05dB, –5.0dB and –12dB (re. 20kHz with 48kHz files) traded against stopband rejections of 112dB, 16dB, 93dB, 21dB and 98dB, respectively. With 96kHz media the 45kHz responses are –0.5dB, –5.0dB, –0.2dB, –7.2dB and –23.7dB, respectively.

Low-level resolution is true to ±0.1dB over a full 110dB range (and only +0.5dB adrift at –120dBFs) thanks to the 4.2V peak-level output and very generous 115.0dB A-wtd S/N ratio, all from a 115ohm balanced/XLR source impedance. Distortion settles out at 0.0003%/1kHz at peak level (re. 1kHz) falling to a lower 0.00005% with upsampling switched *off* [see Graph 1]. Similarly, peak level digital inputs cause a digital clip of ~0.4% at 20kHz (falling back to 0.00035%/–10dBFs) when 'upsampling' is engaged, though this is highly unlikely to occur with typical music data. Otherwise, the 9000N's post-DAC analogue stage offers a fine >105dB stereo separation and 0.01dB channel balance (all re. 20Hz-20kHz). **PM**



ABOVE: THD vs. 48kHz/24-bit digital signal level over a 120dB dynamic range (black, Lin. phase fast 1kHz; red, upsampled 20kHz; blue, Lin. phase fast 20kHz)



ABOVE: High resolution 24-bit jitter spectrum with markers indicating PSU-induced sidebands

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level / Impedance	4.22Vrms / 115ohm (XLR out)
A-wtd S/N ratio (USB / Network)	115.0dB / 114.9dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.00005% / 0.0003%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.0003% / 0.002%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0 to –0.4dB/–9.6dB/–15dB
Digital jitter (48kHz / 96kHz / 192kHz)	18psec / 12psec / 9psec
Resolution (1kHz @ –100dBFs/–110dBFs)	±0.1dB / ±0.1dB
Power consumption	15W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	444x89x333mm / 6.2kg

Three-way floorstanding loudspeaker
Made by: Sonus faber SpA (Fine Sounds Group), Italy
Supplied by: Fine Sounds UK
Telephone: 01592 744 710
Web: www.sonusfaber.com; https://finesounds.uk
Price: £2999

Sonus faber Lumina V Amator

There's more to this slender, stylish Italian floorstander than striking wood veneers as trickledown hits the target
Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Think Sonus faber, and the chances are you'll imagine speakers with luxurious finishes and price tags to match. After all, the company used the 2024 CES event to roll out its Suprema speaker system [p22], comprising two main 'towers' and two subwoofers, with a £695,000 price tag. But such lofty ambition also brings the option of 'trickling down' new technologies to less expensive models, including the £2999 Lumina V Amator floorstander we have here.

There's more to the new arrivals – there's also a £1299 Lumina II Amator two-way bookshelf speaker – than the eye-catching real-wood veneers of the main baffle, available in glossy red, walnut and wenge finishes with a striking 45° grain orientation. In common with other Sonus faber Amator models [*HFN* Apr '21], the new speakers also feature additional tuning to set them apart from the 'standard' offering.

'You don't have to pussyfoot around with these speakers'

PAYING HOMAGE

As part of the upgrades, the midrange driver does much of the heavy lifting: the transition between it and the tweeter has been raised to 2.85kHz, up 250Hz from that of the regular (£2499) Lumina V, while the bass crossover remains at 260Hz. A new 'Hybrid IFF/Paracross Topology' network draws on the development of the company's Homage speakers and uses components from the G5 versions of its Amati [*HFN* Aug '23] and Guarneri designs.

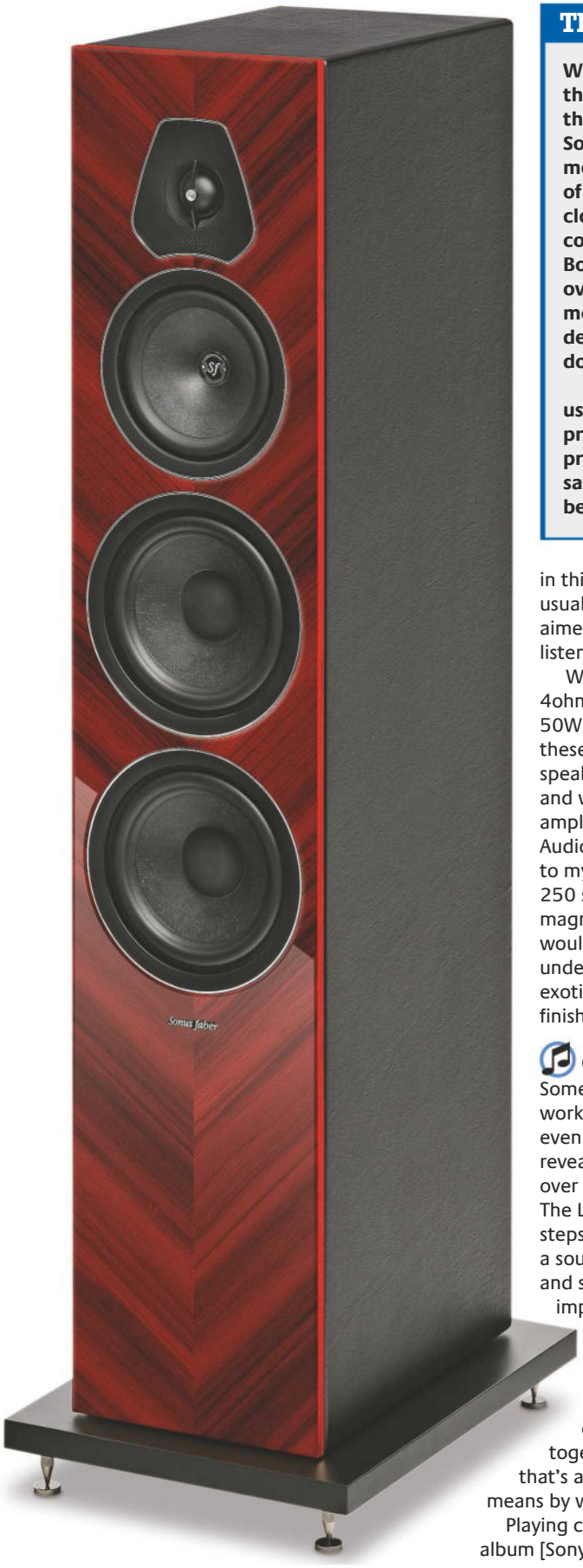
The main enclosure, wrapped in faux-leather, looks simple and rectilinear but within the enclosure is a version of the company's lute-shaped housing, here to set the tweeter and midrange driver apart from the bass units while also reinforcing the entire sub-cabinet. Another 'hidden' feature is the substantial bass reflex port, venting downwards through the bottom of the enclosure and the stabilising plinth. This is designed to make the Lumina V Amator less sensitive to room boundary positioning but does mean the rather tall spikes supplied are vital to provide the space into which the port works.

SET-UP SIMPLICITY

The drivers here are the same as those found in the standard Lumina models: the tweeter is the company's 29mm DAD (Damped Apex Dome) unit, derived from the Sonetto range [*HFN* Nov '18] and with its hand-coated silk diaphragm damper carried on the vertical crossbar in front of it. Meanwhile, the 150mm midrange driver blends fibre and paper, also used in the Sonettos, while the twin 165mm bass drivers employ a sandwich paper cone and were designed specifically for the Lumina.

While Sonus faber's floorstander looks imposing in the pictures, the speaker is neither huge nor massively weighty, standing just under 105cm tall and, at 22.5kg, about light enough for one-person set-up, adding convenience to the room-friendliness. Positioning is no trickier, in no small part due to that downward-firing port. I spent some time moving the Lumina V Amators backwards and forwards in the room, finding very little difference wherever I placed them, and concentrated instead on experimenting with toe-in for the most coherent stereo image. Again, I was unable to effect any huge changes

RIGHT: Available in Gloss Red, Wenge and Walnut 45° angle wood veneers, the Lumina V Amator's baffle hosts a 29mm DAD tweeter, a 150mm paper-cone midrange driver and two 165mm pulp/syntactic foam sandwich diaphragm woofers venting through the base



THE SWEET SPOT?

With the arrival of some recent loudspeakers, it seems the gap between the high-end speakers we all dream of, and drool over, at hi-fi shows and the ones we can actually afford is getting ever smaller. Designs such as Sonus faber's Lumina line, using trickle-down technology from pricier models while retaining the USP of Italian build and style, are an example of this trend, as is the KEF R series [*HFN* Jan '24], which seems to inch ever closer to the company's flagship Reference lineup [*HFN* Jun '23] when it comes to both technology and performance. Elsewhere, the entry-level Bowers & Wilkins 600 series [*HFN* Dec '23], which once jousted with those overachieving 'Brit boxes' down in the £100-£200 arena, has gradually moved up in terms of the performance it delivers, thanks to technology derived from the company's pricier models, and is now knocking on the door of the midrange 700 series [*HFN* Mar '23].

Then again, a manufacturer can fill a gap with some clever thinking and use of what it already has quite literally on the shelf. For example, PMC's prodigy models [*HFN* Nov '23] have become quite a hit at a new, affordable price, thanks to some judicious cost-cutting. You can only have it in black satin, and grilles are an extra-cost option, but the component quality has been maintained, and the sound is a revelation at the price.

in this department, so stuck to my usual positioning with the cabinets aimed just slightly in front of the listening position.

With their rated 89dB sensitivity, 4ohm nominal impedance and a 50W minimum power requirement, these are not especially demanding speakers [see PM's Lab Report, p73], and worked well with the various amplifiers I tried, ranging from Audiolab's 9000A [*HFN* Aug '23] up to my vintage Naim NAC 52/NAP 250 set-up. I should mention that magnetic grilles are provided, but it would be a shame to cover up the understated dark wenge or more exotic gloss red and walnut wood finishes on offer!

CULTURE CLUB

Some speakers require real effort to work out just what they're doing, even with familiar music, only revealing their virtues (and vices) over an extended listening period. The Lumina V Amator, however, steps right up to the plate with a sound that's refined, cultured and supremely easy to enjoy. It impresses with a combination of bass richness, an open and attractive midband and sweet yet explicit treble. Best of all, though, is the way this design puts all these elements together to create a presentation that's all about the music, not the means by which it's being reproduced.

Playing cellist Sol Gabetta's *Mendelssohn* album [Sony Classical 19439934002], on which she delivers the composer's complete works for the instrument, with accompaniment by pianist Bertrand Chamayou, the effortless nature of these speakers' delivery is much in evidence. With little finessing of their set-up, they presented the two musicians before the listener in a realistic, focused soundstage, and got on with the job of drawing the attention to the assured playing and the textures of strings and keys.

And it's not just with simple recordings that the Lumina V Amators shine. Listening to the lustrous Houston Chamber Choir recording of Daniel Knaggs' *Two Streams* [Capella Records CR-429], it's impossible not to be swept away by the intensity of both writing and performance, and the way the perfectly matched voices and accompanying musicians occupy a convincing concert hall acoustic. The latter, incidentally, extends well beyond the speakers in three dimensions, imbued with both weight and wide-open clarity.

LET'S DANCE

A spot of chilly evening immersion in composer Ólafur Arnalds' 2013 big-label début, *For Now I Am Winter* [Mercury 4810177], found the speakers as adept with the big sweeping themes as they were with driving the dancing rhythms of the title track. Similarly, the stripped-back 'Words Of Amber' held almost breathless attention at the way each note was struck and decayed against a subtly shimmering accompaniment. It's an act the album repeats with 'Old Skin', where the Lumina V Amator's combination of taut, pulsing bass and mid/treble detail brought out all the strangeness of the music.

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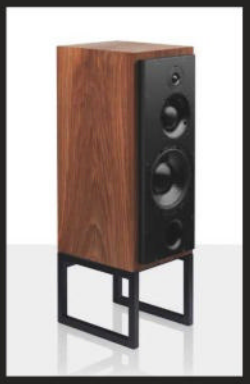

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LEFT: Bi-wiring and bi-amping are accommodated via Sonus faber's split crossover while the wide, downward-firing port exhausts through the base of the cabinet and stabilising plinth

These aren't, perhaps, the model to choose if you want PA-stack levels of sound pressure and aggression, as was illustrated by a brief listen to the raw-edged attack of Green Day's *Saviors* [Reprise 093624866077] – the speakers will do all the recording asks of them, but don't expect the results to be pretty if the production aims for maximum abrasion!

That's not to say you have to pussyfoot around with your choice of music to please them, though. With *White Music*, XTC's 1978 debut album [Virgin 724385069123] – genuine pop-punk rather than a facsimile from more than four decades later, *à la* Green Day – the open sound of the Lumina V Amator allows the likes of 'This Is Pop?' and the immortal 'Statue Of Liberty' to slam out into the room with their spiky quirkiness intact. It's huge, hilarious fun and, for those of us of a certain age, a reminder it never sounded this punchy, nor as detailed, back then as it does through these sophisticated Italian loudspeakers.

SACKS APPEAL

Revert to the simplicity of flugelhorn player Angelo Verploegen and pianist Jerone van Vliet's *Little Dancer* set [Just Listen Records JL033] – one of those live, straight-to-DSD recordings which is the label's speciality – and the speakers seem to shrink down to deliver the intimacy of the event. It's just two guys playing live and bouncing off each other in front of the studio microphones, all recorded, mixed and produced by label founder Jared Sacks, and that's exactly what you get delivered into your listening room. It's delightful in its lack of pretension and the way it rejoices in sheer musicianship, and the smooth yet detailed presentation of these floorstanders is ideally suited.

Sure, the premise of the Lumina V Amators – ease of system-matching and positioning, allied to superb craftsmanship – may seem a bit 'lifestyle', but these are quite simply superb speakers made user-friendly. And who'd argue with that?

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

These may be some of the most affordable speakers in the Sonus faber catalogue, but there's little sign of any trade-off in the quality of the build or the sound. As a relatively more mass-market prospect than some of the company's exotica, they deserve to do well: they look the part (in three colourways), have some clever engineering touches to add to their appeal, and are beautifully built for the money.

Sound Quality: 88%

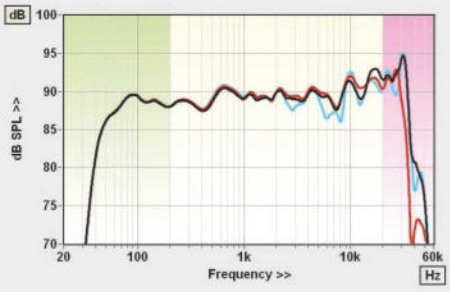
0 - - - - - - - - 100

LAB REPORT

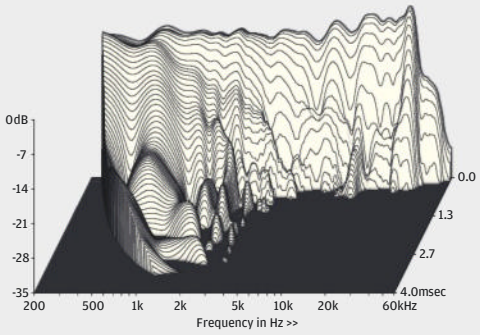
SONUS FABER LUMINA V AMATOR

The drivers in this three-way floorstanding speaker are, on the whole, well behaved with only the 150mm pulp mid unit slightly stretched – a step in response once into its stride after the 260Hz crossover [see Graph 1], and a mild resonance just before the top 2.9kHz crossover visible in the CSD waterfall [Graph 2] likely to be a mild cone/surround mistermination. Otherwise the V Amator's rated 89dB sensitivity is well met at 89.1dB/1kHz and 89.5dB (500Hz-8kHz). The forward response, too, is flat to within fairly tight ±2.2dB and ±2.6dB limits (200Hz-20kHz), respectively, with the largest undulations occurring above 7kHz as the 29mm DAD tweeter builds to a resonant peak at 31kHz [pink shaded area, Graph 1]. One of our pair did not have quite the same extension [red trace, Graph 1] but pair matching is otherwise superb at a tight 0.45dB from 200Hz-10kHz, 'slackening' slightly to 1.2dB above 10kHz. In practice, listening at or above the top of the cabinet, or toeing the speakers inwards by 10-15°, will sweeten the top-end response, but the grilles exaggerate the treble dips and peaks by up to 3dB above 3kHz so are best employed when the speakers are 'resting' [blue trace, Graph 1].

Both 165mm sandwich-coned woofers peak at 97Hz and are supplemented by the robust 43Hz output of the huge, downward-firing port (beware thick carpets...) to deliver a diffraction-corrected bass extension of 42Hz (–6dB re. 200Hz). The minimum 2.8ohm/104Hz impedance, and –57°/70Hz to +42°/21Hz swings in phase angle, contribute to a tough EPDR of 1.15ohm/85Hz in the bass (and 1.7ohm/2.15kHz), so all that punch still demands a capable amplifier. **PM**



ABOVE: Response inc. nearfield summed driver/port [green], freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V [yellow], ultrasonic [pink]. Left, black; right, red; w. grille, blue



ABOVE: Cabinet is well enough damped and just one mid-cone mistermination visible prior to crossover

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V – 1kHz/Mean/IEC)	89.1dB / 89.5dB / 87.9dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	2.8ohm @ 104Hz 21ohm @ 27.2Hz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	–57° @ 70Hz +42° @ 21Hz
Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz–20kHz)	1.2dB/ ±2.2dB/±2.6dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	42Hz / 36kHz/32kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.3% / 0.15% / 0.55%
Dimensions (HWD) / **Weight** (each)	1049x280x373mm / 23kg

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hi-fi news EDITOR'S CHOICE

Audiophiles are assaulted by a fog of noise, and not just from the Internet. Chord aims to remove the hash from our wired Ethernet. Review: **Paul Miller** & **Andrew Everard**

Filters, particularly AC mains filters and regenerators, have long been an audiophile staple but the genre has expanded in recent years to accommodate our embrace of digital and streaming audio in particular. With 'high speed' digital transmission comes the prospect of a sea of extraneous noise and interference, from both outside and inside the 'system loop', that washes though our equipment. Jitter in the digital domain and RF-related IM and other distortions are the least of what we understand as the audible consequences of this entirely unwanted hash.

English Electric, the 'hardware' arm of The Chord Company, is not alone in producing a simple, passive in-line barrier to this noise, but while there's an equal amount of noise on the Internet about these devices, the EE1 is the 'real deal'.

Inside the black alloy case is an Ethernet transformer with independent galvanic isolation for all its differential signal lines. This selectively removes noise propagating in common mode while allowing the data, transmitted in differential mode, to pass. It's tuned to maintain the differential trace impedance of 100ohm and offer a very low insertion loss of around 0.2dB. The filter boasts a CMRR (common mode rejection ratio) at RF of –50dB/2MHz falling to around –15dB/200MHz.

ABOVE: For a limited period, the EE1 is bundled with a 0.75m length of Chord's C-Stream Cat 7-rated Ethernet cable (valued at £62)

BELOW: Built into a black-anodised alloy lozenge, with RJ45 sockets at either end, the EE1 combines EMI rejection with common mode filtering

English Electric is also employing an EMI filter network, using surface mount chip resistors and capacitors, on the centre taps of the transformer primaries. The capacitors are rated at 2kV to exceed the input/output isolation of around 1.5kV. At lower frequencies (up to ~400kHz), the EE1 should be able to suppress common mode noise by up to 15dB and in differential mode by about 10dB.

That's the inside story, anyway – now I'll hand over to Andrew in the listening room.

ANDREW ASSEMBLES

Auditioning the EE1 presented its own problems as I had to unthink the niceties of my current set-up, which uses extensive optical isolation, and go back to basics in order to create a benchmark against which to gauge this device's impact. That involved a choice of set-ups: one with a simple NAS store and my Naim network player connected to an eight-port switch fed by my Virgin cable modem, and the other with a Melco music library interposed between the switch and a USB DAC.

I also experimented with a very affordable network system, in the form of the WiiM Amp, a £299 all-in-one streaming solution with inbuilt 60W-rated amplifier. Now, all of these set-ups already have some degree of filtering and noise reduction built-in, so the EE1 was not doing all the heavy lifting in isolation. Indeed, wherever in the data chain I used the EE1 device, the improvements were at best marginal, typically hard to repeat, and by no means consistent across the various test scenarios.

That said, there were recordings where I perceived gains in resolution, presumably due to the reduction of RFI impacting on performance elsewhere in the system. With Sol Gabetta's Mendelssohn set [Sony Classical 19439934002], the addition of the EE1 brought a little more bite to the sound of the cello, and opened up the recorded acoustic in a slightly more persuasive fashion. Similarly with Union Station's classic *New Favorite* album [Rounder Records; SACD 11661-0495-6], Alison Krauss's vocals stood out a little more against the accompanying country-infused strings.

FRINGE BENEFITS

In general it was atmospheric recordings, from intimate jazz to 'big acoustic' classical and choral, that benefited the most, gaining a greater sense of space and air, but this was more a mild increase in the 'rightness' of the sound rather than anything tangible or remarkable. The only conclusion to be drawn, then, is that the EE1 might be the last bit of finessing from which your system will benefit, rather than a universal catch-all, and is thus an add-on to be auditioned long and hard in your own 'network environment' before purchase.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Summing up the EE1 is tricky: yes, it's worth a try, especially if you have a simple network set-up and this is your only means of optimisation, but be aware that there are less expensive rivals with the same aim. It's also worth remembering that some network audio players may well have advanced noise-busting strategies built-in, which may well further marginalise the effect of adding the EE1. Find a friendly dealer and ask for a home demo...

Sound Quality: 86%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

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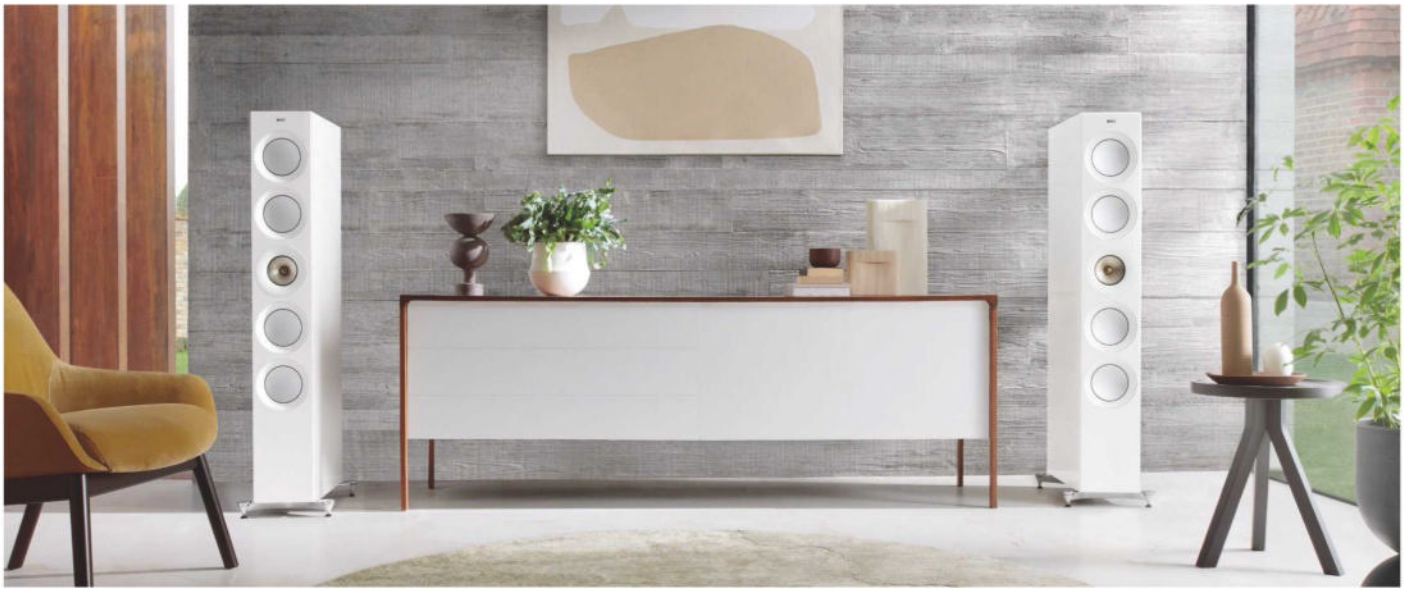

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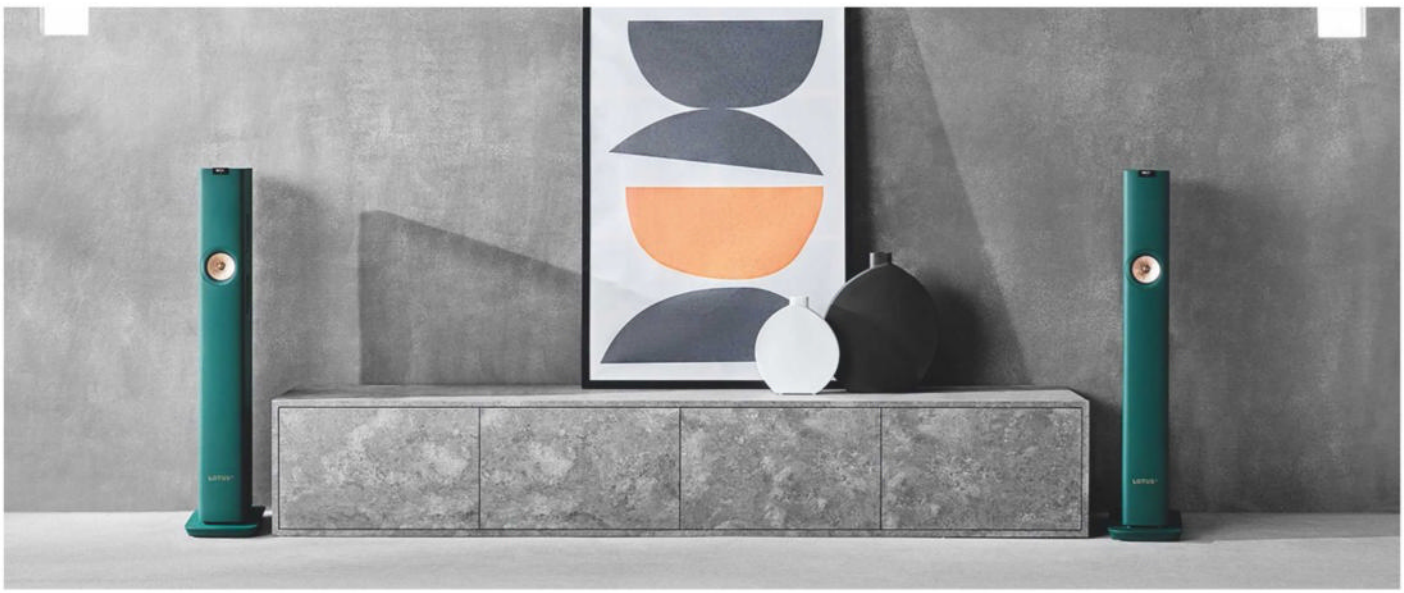


Many KEF models on demonstration. Please call to make an appointment.

Carlo Gesualdo
Prince Of Darkness

It's both impossible and essential to put the composer's life-story to one side when listening to this music of love and loss, and life and death, says **Peter Quantrill**

Denis Stevens was a British musicologist who, in the early 1960s, began persuading people to listen to Gesualdo's music rather than marvel at the composer with horrified fascination. One night, after rehearsing the Sixth Book of Madrigals, he was so stunned that on his way home he caught the right train going in the wrong direction.

Contrast that with the reaction of musicologist Alfred Einstein when gingerly leafing through the pages of Book 6: 'It is impossible to sing three such pieces one after the other without being seized by a sort of nausea or musical sea-sickness, for the dose is too strong and the unsteadiness too prolonged'.

THE COOK, THE THIEF...

Readers of *HFN* are made of stronger stuff. But I wonder whether Einstein would have felt his stomach turn without prior knowledge of Gesualdo's infamous life-story. To recap, he was born around 1560 in Venosa, just east of Naples, the second son of Duke Fabrizio Gesualdo. By 1590 he was heir to the throne, and married to Donna Marie d'Avalos (herself already twice widowed, still in her 20s). Finding her *in flagrante delicto*, he murdered both his wife and her lover.

The bodies were then publicly displayed according to Don Carlo's orders with a placard explaining the tragedy. Suffering, so it seems, more from private guilt than criminal censure, he married again in 1595. Meanwhile Gesualdo had thrown himself into music with the same obsessive fervour that he conducted all his affairs. The composer Cavalieri met him early in 1594. 'The Prince of Venosa, who would like to do nothing but sing and play music, today forced me to visit him and kept me for seven hours. After this, I believe I shall hear no more music for two months.'

Until his death in 1613, Gesualdo lived as a recluse in the family seats of Venosa and Gesualdo. He left behind six books of madrigals, and sacred motets including the three sets of Tenebrae responsories for the penitential liturgies of the Triduum, on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday.

Gesualdo was not an Easter Sunday man. Light does not conquer darkness in his music, and life does not overcome death, even though music is by its nature an expression of life. The Tenebrae are an apt liturgical metaphor for his style. They occupy a liminal space between crucifixion and resurrection. The later madrigals are written not within key signatures but in between them, across the boundaries of consonance and dissonance.

UNMISTAKABLE CRAFT

Not all his music is like this. If all Gesualdo knew how to do was break the rules, he would be another sad and sordid but forgettable misfit. The First Book of Madrigals opens with a sensuous but decorous setting of 'Baci soavi e cari' (Dear, sweet kisses). As it continues with finely drawn portraits of noble ladies, shepherd girls, love affairs frustrated and consummated, the volume would hardly sound out of place in the catalogue of other first-rank Italian madrigalists such as Marenzio or Luzzasco.

From the outset, though, the craft is unmistakable, almost unrivalled among his contemporaries. If Gesualdo had an apprentice period – and he must have learnt from someone, at some point – we have no record of it. Such biographical holes only serve to enhance his mystique. Poets of the day rushed to re-tell and invent his life with the enthusiasm of door-stepping tabloid journalists. In our time, eight operas about Gesualdo have appeared in the last 30 years. There is more music about and inspired by him than the total of his extant output (around ten to 12 hours), much of it unworthy of its subject, trading off his 'modernity'.

Stravinsky knew better. The eight-minute *Monumentum pro Gesualdo* [see Essential Recordings, opposite] transcribes and recomposes three pieces, sounding entirely like both

PHOTO: CAROLINE FORBES

The Hilliard Ensemble led by Paul Hillier (front left) have recorded both sacred and secular Gesualdo

Delitiae Musicae: their complete Madrigals on Naxos benefit from a native feeling for text

> 'Biographical holes serve to enhance his mystique'

composers at the same time. The Werner Herzog documentary (*Gesualdo, Death For Five Voices*) also captures something true and slightly deranged and essential to our understanding of both the music and the man. It stars the folk/pop/avant-garde singer Milva as a reincarnated Donna Marie, two cooks and the staff of a mental health clinic where patients believe themselves to be Gesualdo.

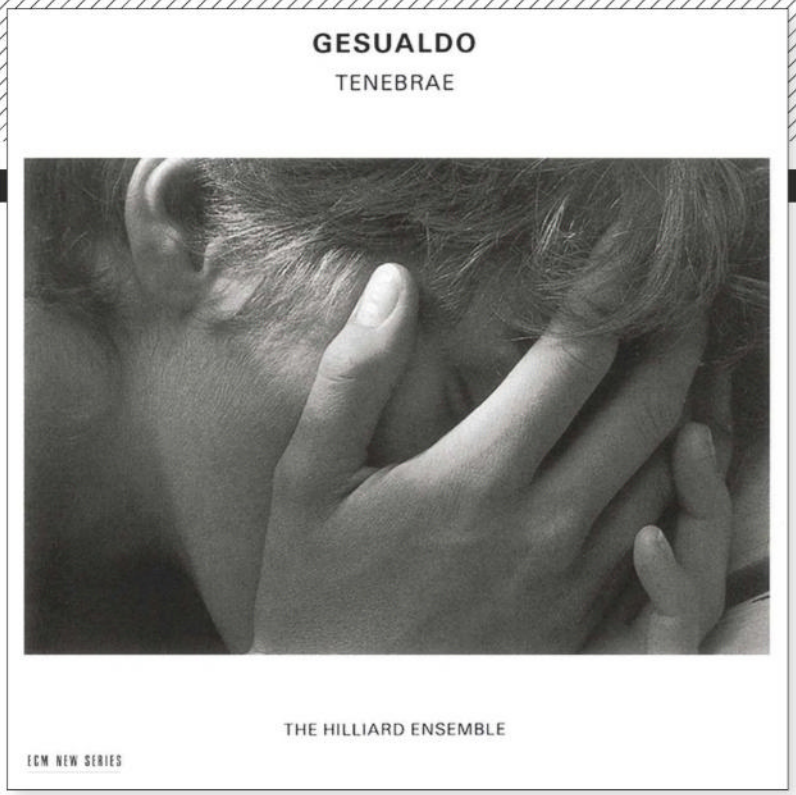
The very first recording of *Monumentum*, on CBS, featured a Side A of Robert Craft conducting Gesualdo originals. In 2024, it shows how singers and listeners like Einstein could indeed find themselves entirely at sea in music for which there was no established performing style. My first encounter with Gesualdo's music was a 1967 Das Alte Werk LP of the Prague Madrigal Singers in the Holy Saturday Tenebrae Responsories. Where the dissonances on the page end and the wobble in the voices takes over, who can say?

Paul Agnew brings decades of experience as both singer and director to his Gesualdo albums

The best Gesualdo recordings evoke austerity and opulence in equal measure. They may exploit the generous resonance of a church or the analytical intimacy of a radio studio. Too much echo, and the harmony blurs. Too little space, and every last vocal blemish stands out.

Of course, performers don't have to be Italian to make sense of Gesualdo, of the madrigals in particular, but it seems to help. Italian ensembles are still overcoming a persistent chauvinism in the field of early music, but groups like Delitiae Musicae, La Compagnia del Madrigale and La Venexiana combine pinpoint tuning with a native feeling for text and phrase, for the swooping and dipping lines and for those moments when a suspension wants to be touched in or drawn out.

Over 30 years old but still unsurpassed for a sense of penitential atmosphere: the ECM/ Hilliard album of Tenebrae Responsories



ALL TOO HUMAN

Even so, a late madrigal such as 'Gioite voi, col canto', opening the Fifth Book, invites a spectrum of approaches as broad as a Mahler symphony. The Consort of Musicke leap through its hoops. La Venexiana impart a healthy swing to the pulse that holds the listener's ear across metrical breaks and abrupt paragraphing. Les Arts Florissants go for word-by-word-painting of the text's intermingled joy and sorrow. Concerto Italiano aim for a more sensuous blend, palpably directed into and away from climaxes by Rinaldo Alessandrini. My own taste runs to Delitiae Musicae, slower than most, caressing each phrase, though the all-male range of vocal colour won't appeal to everyone.

By virtue of their Latin texts, their less exotic harmonies and more readily comprehensible syntax, the Tenebrae respond to a wider field of performers. Again, the all-male lineup of the Hilliard Ensemble imparts a force and sobriety in tune with the acoustic of Douai Abbey. They capture what is deeply human and alien about this music, while their fervent declamation resists the old pull towards solemnity. Encapsulating his predecessor, Stravinsky quoted Alexander Pope: 'The lights and shades, whose well-accorded strife...'.

ESSENTIAL RECORDINGS

Tenebrae Responsories
ECM 8438672 (2CDs)
Two hours of aching, suspended dissonance, the Hilliard Ensemble's rich voices cloaked in a suitably resonant church acoustic.

Gesualdo, Tallis, Bingham
Hyperion CDA68348
The Gesualdo Six Ensemble in warmer, more intimate accounts, insightfully paired with later English responses to the texts.

Monumentum pro Gesualdo di Venosa, *etc*
Pentatone PTC5186349
Stravinsky's instrumental tribute, coupled with choral works (the Mass and Psalms) in suitably austere accounts under Herreweghe.

Madrigals, Books 5 & 6
Naxos 8573147-49 (3CDs)
Culmination of Gesualdo's madrigal writing from the Italian ensemble Delitiae Musicae, attentive to subtleties of text and setting.

Madrigals, Book 6
Glossa GCD922801
A fuller, more passionately declaimed but poised response to the same pieces from the native voices of La Compagnia del Madrigale.

Psalmody, Carlo, L'Ombra della croce, *etc*
ECM 4811800 (2CDs)
Contemporary responses to Gesualdo, by Brett Dean and Erkki-Sven Tüür, blending Renaissance and modern sensibilities.

Fatboy Slim
...A Long Way, Baby

Blending genres and fusing samples, this 1998 album – now remastered on 180g – cemented Norman Cook's status as the king of Big Beat, says **Steve Sutherland**

STEVE SUTHERLAND

Steve edited NME from 1992-2000, the Britpop years, launching NME.com and reviving the NME Awards. Previously he was Assistant Editor on Melody Maker. Among his many adventures he has been physically threatened by Axl Rose, hung out awhile with Jerry Garcia and had a drink or two with Keith Richards...

It may well have something to do with the wretched state of the world right now but have you noticed how the 1990s are back in vogue? Celebrated by those who lived through it as a halcyon decade on a par with the legendary 1960s, the '90s are being glowingly reassessed as a time of growth and hope when world politics had not gone totally crazy, we weren't all existing on the breadline, the arts were actually appreciated as something inspirational and worthwhile, and anything seemed within the range of possibility for just about everyone.

THE FINAL FRONTIER

As an example of what larks those of us who were around in the 1990s were lucky enough to partake in, I'd like to briefly recount a presentation I did to a bunch of advertisers when I was editing *NME* in 1998. I stood up before them and announced that we had a plan to send a DJ into space. We actually didn't but here's the thing – no one thought I was nuts. The audience – and I for that matter – really thought it was on. The scheme, as I explained it, was to get Richard Branson to stump up the dosh to finance the launch and that, as the DJ was going to be the very first human ever to spin discs orbiting the earth, they could grab some prestigious advertising slots. Oh, and there was some guff about a *Guinness Book Of Records* entry being chucked in for good measure.

I met with the manager of the DJ that I had in mind and we further cooked up the scheme only to be scuppered when the DJ himself, probably quite sensibly, said he wasn't doing it. The DJ, by the way, was Fatboy Slim.

> 'Fatboy Slim's debut LP got the Big Beat ball rolling'

Looking back at it now, I couldn't have chosen a more fitting candidate. I mean, Fatboy Slim was pure 1990s.

'CALL ME NORMAN'

Born Quentin Leo Cook, once he got involved in making music he dropped the Quentin, considering it too posh to be taken seriously by the indie elite, and became Norman. Starting out he was an unlikely pop star – the bass player, of all things, in a rough and ready band from Hull called The Housemartins. As they started to do okay and make a bit of a name for themselves, Cook branched out on his own, firstly hiding behind the monikers Pizzaman and Mighty Dub Katz, and then making tracks under the guises of Beats International, Freak Power and, finally, Fatboy Slim.

The thing Fatboy created – alongside other like-minded acts like The Chemical Brothers and The Prodigy – was called Big Beat. This new-fangled sound was built from sampling, which was by-and-large just pilfering the best bits from your favourite records and making something brand spanking new and giddily danceable. As one magazine put it at the time: 'The big beat formula is essentially: 1) Grab a breakbeat and compress it liberally. 2) Cut and paste some bits from funk and soul records. 3) Grab a vocal ('Get busy, child') and sprinkle in some samples of old children's records or soundtracks. 4) Fill in some holes with a synth line or two. 5) Add a twist of rocker aggression, psychedelia, or rave influence. 6) Rinse, repeat'.

Most of the Big Beat biggies played at a mid-tempo between 90 and 120 BPM – faster than

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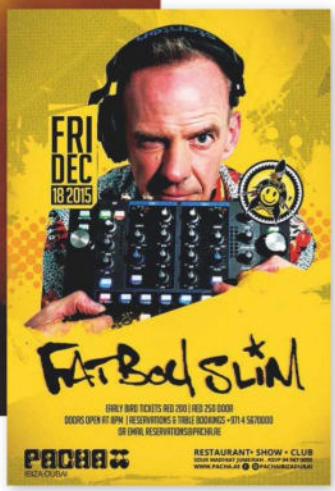
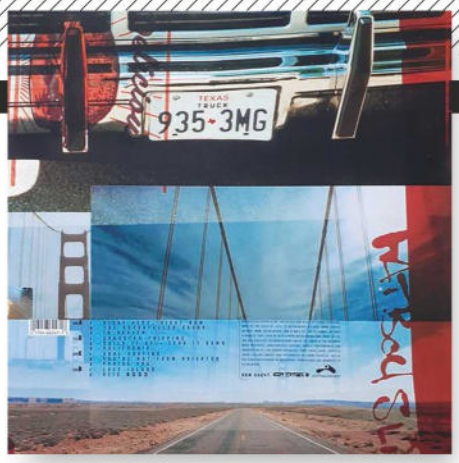


Cook on stage in Kyiv, Ukraine in July 2021, label of the original LP (inset), poster for an appearance in 2015 at Pacha Ibiza in Dubai



The 180g reissue of Fatboy Slim's *You've Come A Long Way, Baby* costs £32.99 if ordered via *www.fatboyslim.net*

most hip-hop and trip-hop, but slower than house and techno. As long as the builds and drops worked up clubbers to fever pitch, you had a hit on your hands. It sounded so simple surely anyone could do it – our Norman being proof of that pudding. Except it wasn't quite like that because you needed an ear finely tuned to the ebb and flow of music, and an unshakeable vocal and/ or instrumental phrase. And Norman was a genius at that.

PICK 'N' MIX

Growing his audience at the Big Beat Boutique club in Brighton, he released his tracks via Skint, a seaside indie run by an enthusiastic pal called Damian Harris who told the papers: 'I'm tremendously proud of the label. I always thought the formula of Big Beat was the breakbeats of hip-hop, the energy of acid house, and the pop sensibilities of The Beatles, with a little bit of punk sensibility, all rolled into one'.

Fatboy got the ball rolling with his 1996 debut LP *Better Living Through Chemistry*. But it was the follow-up, 1998's *You've Come A Long Way, Baby*, that really turned on the world. Assembled in his Brighton home studio, known as The House Of Love, using an Atari ST computer, Creator software, and floppy disks, it's rightly revered for a quartet of monster singles.

The first was 'The Rockafeller Skank', which sampled its title vocal from the track 'Vinyl Dogs Vibe' by Vinyl Dogs. Other borrowed bits included 'Sliced Tomatoes' by Just Brothers, The Bobby Fuller Four's 'I Fought The Law', 'Join The Gang' by David Bowie, John Barry's 'Beat Girl', Brian Poole & The Tremeloes' 'Why Can't You Love Me' and The J J All Stars' 'Soup'. Once he'd paid for all the samples, Fatboy reckons he was left with no royalties for himself, and the follow-up singles – 'Gangster Tripping', 'Praise You' and 'Right Here, Right Now' – were similarly sample-heavy.

Cook in 2006 – for dates of his 2024 UK tour see *www.fatboyslim.net*

HOLD THE FRONT PAGE

Not only did the album top the UK charts and win a Brit Award, with the benefit of hindsight you can see how *You've Come A Long Way, Baby* established a mindset that was later actioned by the digital revolution where, thanks to Spotify, Tidal *et al*, all music is available so all music is *now*.

But all good things must come to an end. One chilly morning in 2003 I walked into my local shop to buy bread and milk when a heavily tattooed skinhead bloke I vaguely knew from the local pub let out a sort of sobbing moan. 'Oh no!' he exclaimed to nobody in particular. He held in his trembling hands a daily newspaper, its front page plastered with the dreadful news that Norman Cook and his wife, the popular broadcaster and nation's sweetheart Zoe Ball, had split up.

The guy was genuinely gutted. And in the harsh, cold light of that Saturday morning the realisation dawned that our honeymoon with hedonism was over. As Damian Harris so succinctly put it: 'Big Beat, which started as a breath of fresh air, exciting and liberating, ended up like the loud, annoying drunken bloke you really wish would leave the party'. C'est la vie.

RE-RELEASE VERDICT

Issued toward the end of 2023 to mark the 25th anniversary of *You've Come A Long Way, Baby*, this 180g double-LP edition [Skint Records BRASSIC11HSLP] features a new half-speed remastering by Miles Showell of Abbey Road Studios and houses its two black vinyl platters in a gatefold sleeve. Also included is a booklet insert with Fatboy Slim 'timeline' and liner notes. Copies purchased through the artist's offical website at *www.fatboyslim.net* come with a signed cover art card. *HFN*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

Joan Baez *Vol. 1*

The teenage singer with the vibrato soprano shunned the commercial trappings of a major label deal to record this stripped-back collection of traditional folk songs, launching a career that would later see her performing at the White House...

Words: **Mike Barnes**

The first release in the US on Vanguard with black 'Stereolab' labels, part of the company's 'hi-fi' series

Joan Baez with Bob Dylan at the civil rights March on Washington in August 1963

Folk singer and activist Pete Seeger on stage in 1963. He was a formative influence on Baez

Baez on stage in January 2016 during a concert at the Beacon Theatre in New York to celebrate her 75th birthday

Poster for an appearance by the singer at the Berkeley Community Theatre in California in 1967

In July 1959, aged just 18, Joan Baez played at the first Newport Folk Festival at Freebody Park, Rhode Island, and created an instant reaction. Coming off the stage she was approached by newspapers, the student press and *Time* magazine, who all wanted to speak to the unknown teenager with the astonishing pure soprano voice and who had duetted on a few songs with singer, guitarist and banjo player Bob Gibson.

Writing for *All Music*, Bruce Eder said that at the time she looked, 'like the kind of co-ed every mother dreamt her son would bring home', but there was a lot more to her than that description would imply. And prior to this, American folk music had endured some troubled times.

WEAVING A TALE

Five years earlier, Baez had been taken by her Mexican father and Scottish mother to see singer Pete Seeger, and she'd found it a moving and formative experience. Seeger was a figure of particular cultural importance. His group, The Weavers, had formed in 1948 and been at the forefront of the folk music revival in the US, scoring a No 1 hit in 1950 with their version of the American folk standard 'Goodnight, Irene', which had previously been recorded in 1933 by Lead Belly.

Folk numbers were the songs of working people, with many born from hardship and oppression, and so they tended to be associated with the political left. Seeger had been involved with The People's Songs organisation, which promoted 'songs of labor', and played union benefits. He had also been a member of the Communist party.

After the Second World War there was a widespread fear of communism in the US, which prompted the so-called Second Red Scare – also known as McCarthyism, after anti-communist senator Joseph McCarthy – and the attention soon turned to folk music. The Weavers were effectively blacklisted and Seeger had to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee, narrowly escaping jail.

> 'Baez felt an outsider due to her Mexican surname'

OUT OF SORTS

In her memoir *And A Voice To Sing With*, Joan Baez recalled that in the ninth grade at high school in Redlands, California, she already felt an outsider due to her Mexican surname. She felt that the post-War arms race was 'a jingoistic crusade' and her opposition to it stemmed from her background of attending Quaker meetings with her parents, where non-violence was encouraged. Her father had also given up lucrative defence work and moved into academia.

'By the time I was 14 I had already formulated very strong feelings of what was right and wrong – that people were getting hurt when they shouldn't be hurt', she told *The Guardian* in 1984.

This feeling of isolation led Baez to concentrate on singing in the school choir. Although her voice was true, she felt it was as 'stringy as cheap cotton thread' and so developed her vibrato. Her first performance, at a school talent show, was nerve-wracking and her youthful stage fright could give rose to chronic physical symptoms.

Baez began eleventh grade at Palo Alto High School and had a moment of epiphany when Martin Luther King Jr visited as a guest speaker. She has recalled how she was moved to tears by his speech, which addressed civil rights and non-violence, and felt less alone, more part of a growing movement.

Her love of music burgeoned as well. She grew up with a younger sister, Mimi, who would later marry and be part of the folk duo Richard and Mimi Farina. Baez bought a

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PRODUCTION NOTES

In July 1960, Joan Baez headed to New York City to make her first album for Vanguard Records, the label started in 1950 by Maynard Solomon and his brother Seymour. Had she signed with Columbia, the studio might have been more salubrious, but the venue was the Manhattan Towers Hotel located in a 'dingy block on Broadway'.

The songs were recorded in the ballroom, which was available every day except Wednesday, when it was used as a bingo parlour. Baez has described the venue as a huge room with a musty smell, and how she sang and played standing on 'the dirtiest rug in New York'. Despite this unpromising environment, Maynard Solomon was a highly experienced producer and made a vivid recording.

The set-up consisted of three microphones, left and right for stereo and a middle one for monoaural. Six of the songs featured Freddy Hellerman of The Weavers on guitar. Baez was such an idealist that she felt that having another instrument other than her own guitar and voice would be somewhat 'commercial', which she did not mean in a positive way. However, she was eventually convinced this extra instrumentation would enhance her music.

After appearing at Newport, Baez was becoming increasingly confident and managed to record the ballad

'Mary Hamilton' in just one take. As she recalled later: 'That's the way we made 'em in the old days. As long as a dog didn't run through the room or something, you had it'.

She would record for a few hours and then she and Solomon would go out for a break and refreshments. In three days they managed to record no fewer than 19 songs, 13 of which would be used for *Joan Baez*.

Baez plays guitar at the March on Washington in 1963

The singer at the Frankfurt Easter March in 1966 with peace activist Ira Sandperl (left)

On stage in Charlotte, North Carolina in 2003

The Weavers in 1955 (l-r) Pete Seeger, Ronnie Gilbert, Lee Hays, Fred Hellerman

Baez playing in Hamburg in 1973

Gibson guitar for 50 dollars and as well as her love of Seeger, she was drawn to the music of Harry Belafonte and Odetta.

BOSTON BOUND

Cold war paranoia had driven folk music underground, but it re-emerged in 1957 in the rather more acceptable, clean-cut form of The Kingston Trio and a number of less overtly political combos. Baez initially loved The Kingston Trio, but then began questioning if this more commercial music was 'bastardised and unholy'. Baez was a serious, romantic young woman who enjoyed songs of 'love forsaken' with 'plots of death, misery and heartbreak'. There were many of these in the folk canon, and she learnt songs including 'Fair And Tender Maidens', 'All My Trials', 'Geordie' and 'Silver Dagger'.

> 'Baez enjoyed songs with "plots of death and misery"'

The Baez family moved to Boston in 1958 when her father got a job at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Joan bought a Goya classical guitar with gut strings, learnt songs and played in coffee houses. She realised that she couldn't sing the blues and had to sing in her natural voice, which was 'high and pure'. She got a job singing at Club 47 in Harvard Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which had formerly been a jazz club but had introduced folk nights to keep up with changing trends.

Baez was soon contributing to a compilation album, *Folksingers 'Round Harvard Square*, singing six songs solo. The other singer-guitarists were Bill Wood and Ted Alevizos, who sang solo songs but also duetted with Baez. It was recorded in May 1959 and released on Veritas later that year.

FOLK IDOL

Her career was starting to take off. Manager Albert Grossman paid her to sing at his Chicago club, The Gate Of Horn, and it was here that she met Bob Gibson, who invited her to play with him at The Newport Folk Festival. She was now singing to 13,000 people and her choice of songs, 'Virgin Mary Had One Son' and 'We Are Crossing Jordan River', and her pure vocal tone earned her the nicknames 'Madonna' and 'Virgin Mary'.

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Baez arrives at Amsterdam airport in 1966 and (below) on stage in Albany, New York at the Egg Performing Arts Centre, in 2016

Back in Cambridge there were now queues around the block to Club 47 to see Joan Baez, and Albert Grossman turned up again, now wanting to record her. She was invited to go to New York to meet John Hammond, president of Columbia Records, but also knew Maynard Solomon of Vanguard Records and chose it instead. Grossman went on to manage Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix, and if he saw Baez he would remind her to contact him if she ever wanted to get into the big time.

SIMPLY DOES IT

Her debut album for Vanguard, titled *Joan Baez* (now also known as *Vol. 1*), was far from 'bastardised and unholy' but a selection of 13 folk songs (including 'Silver Dagger' and 'House Of The Rising Sun') recorded in an unadorned manner – mainly just her guitar and voice, with extra guitar on some songs from Fred Hellerman of The Weavers. The album was released in Oct. 1960 and although it was a sleeper, when *Joan Baez Vol. 2* was released in 1961, her debut reached No 15 in the US charts, spending 140 weeks there and going gold.

The singer put her political message across in a clear, uncompromising manner. She later wrote: 'My mere existence as a rebellious, barefooted, anti-establishment young girl functioning almost totally out of the context of commercial music and attaining such widespread notoreity designated me a countercultural heroine, whether I understood the full import of the position or not'.

'The album would reach No 15 in the US charts'

CAPITOL GAINS

This outspoken stance didn't always sit well with the music critics, who were predominantly male. One reporter claimed that Baez sung 'to trouble intellectuals'; she was described by another as 'holier than thou'; and Al Capp's satirical L'il Abner cartoon comic strip featured a hypocritical folksinger called Joanie Phoanie.

Not so much a leftist as a pacifist with a socio-political conscience, Baez has been an activist all her life. Although she never wanted to align herself with any political party, she endorsed Barack Obama for the US election in 2008 and sang the civil rights movement anthem 'We Shall Overcome' at the White House in 2010, as she had done on many rallies since the early '60s.

Perhaps the establishment felt it should return the favour – in 2015 the album *Joan Baez* was inducted into the National Recording Registry of the Library Of Congress as having, 'Cultural, artistic and/or historical significance to American society and the nation's audio legacy'.

Alternate Format Discography

ORIGINAL LP

Joan Baez was released in October 1960 on Vanguard in the US with black 'Stereolab' labels [VSD 2077], which was the label's shortlived hi-fi series. Rick Stafford's high-contrast black and white cover was used on Vanguard releases, with sleeve notes on the back by producer/Vanguard Records founder, Maynard Solomon. The mono version had the catalogue number VRS 9078.

The UK release came out on Fontana in mono [TFL 6002, pictured below] and stereo [STFL 6002] and featured a different, monochrome portrait of the singer on the cover. Rather confusingly, this is the same photograph featured on the sleeve of her second album, 1961's *Joan Baez Vol. 2*.

In some European territories, including Italy and Germany where it was released in both stereo and mono on the Amadeo label, the album

was titled *Joan Baez 1* [AVRS 9113]. The Mexico version was *Volumen 1*, in mono, with the track title and sleeve notes translated into Spanish. [Vanguard/Gamma, CV-036].

CASSETTE

Joan Baez was released on stereo cassette in the US in 1960 [Vanguard M 51635], with the 'Stafford' photo and black shells, and a ¼in four-track stereo reel-to-reel [VTC-1635]. When it was reissued on cassette in 1987, also in the US on Vanguard, it came in a salmon pink and black cover with transparent shells.

FIRST CD

The first silver disc release came in 1987 in both Europe and the US as *Joan Baez Volume 1* [VMD-2077-2, pictured below]. In 2011 a CD reissue titled *The Debut Album Plus!* Was released by Chrome Dreams [CDCD5063], including ten tracks from the Boston 1959 sessions that yielded *Folk Singers 'Round Harvard Square*. The insert includes a reproduction of a vintage postcard of Harvard Square.

Joan Baez was also re-released on State Of Art in Europe in 2018 [81216] with an additional seven tracks from the Boston 1959 sessions, plus Maynard Solomon's original liner notes with extra material and photographs.

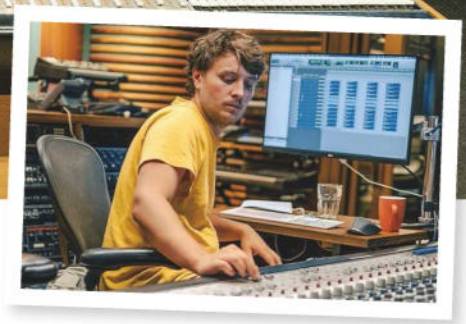
AUDIOPHILE VINYL LP

There have been a number of vinyl reissues of *Joan Baez* including a 2007 release in the UK on Pure Pleasure/Vanguard. This was remastered by Kevin Gray and Steve Hoffman, but because the original stereo tapes had deteriorated it was actually remastered using the mono ones. The LP carries the catalogue number VSD 2077, but perhaps more accurately it should read VRS 9078, the mono catalogue number.

Also available in the UK is a 2023 worldwide release of *Joan Baez* on 180g red vinyl that arrived on 20th Century Masterworks [350251]. This reissue includes two bonus tracks from the 1959 sessions.

Inside the Studio

PHOTO: PHIL MADEIRA



Roundhead Studios

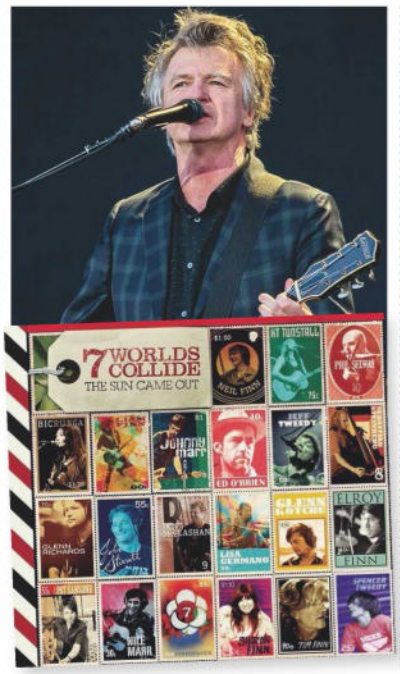
This facility in Auckland is one of the crown jewels of the Kiwi music scene, shaping the sounds of legends while elevating the art of acoustic design. **Steve Sutherland** explains

One of the more lamentable ailments the world is suffering from right now is donor fatigue, which is what happens – or more accurately, doesn't happen – when people inclined to give to charity give up. There are tons of reasons for the current DF epidemic, not least that belts are getting tighter back home, not to mention the proliferation of desperate causes and a suspicion that not all the funds are going where they should.

On top of that, of course, there's the fact that, in the music space at least, many of the events held or artefacts created with good intentions are actually alarmingly duff. Just gathering a bunch of vaguely famous people together to whack out a cover version, no matter that all the hearts are in the right place, is a fast track to naffdom and you wind up in the sort of situation that Sigue Sigue Sputnik guitarist Tony James identified back in the wake of Live Aid in 1985 when he declared it: 'Good for Ethiopians, bad for music'.

Studio A with its Neve console, originally built for The Who, and (inset) studio manager, producer and mix engineer Paddy Hill

Neil Finn, who opened the studios in 2007, and (right) the album *The Sun Came Out* by 7 Worlds Collide



MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

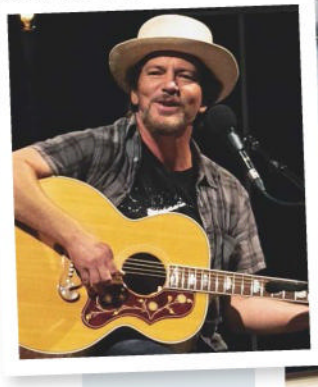
Thankfully, there is a remedy to all this and one chap who got – and continues to get – it right is Neil Finn. This should come as no surprise as he's already navigated his way unerringly through a couple of careers of artistic high quality in the shape of Split Enz, then Crowded House, so we trust he knows what he's doing. And what he did was this: in 2001 he created 7 Worlds Collide, a loose aggregation of musicians minded to give it a go working together with the aim of making something

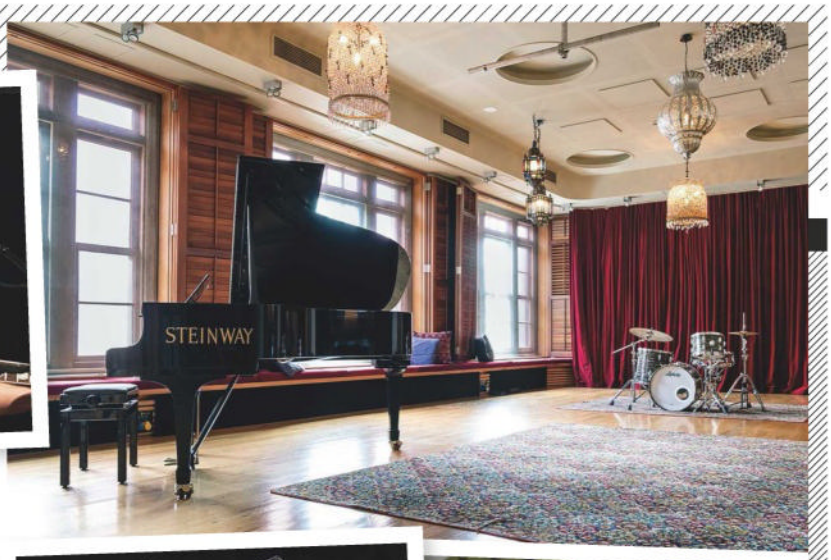
KEY RECORDING TIMELINE

2009
Wilco win a Grammy for their sixth studio release, *Wilco (The Album)*, recorded at Roundhead Studios

2016
British indie folk singer Passenger records songs for *Young As The Morning, Old As The Sea*. It's a No 1

2017
Neil Finn livestreams the making of his fourth studio album, *Out Of Silence*, on his Facebook page





worthwhile for themselves and the buyer/listener/audience, with the proceeds benefitting a charity. In this case it was Médecins Sans Frontières (*aka*, Doctors Without Borders), which sends emergency medical help around the globe wherever it's needed regardless of race, religion, social status or political allegiance.

'The idea was to form a band with a bunch of people – some that I knew reasonably well, others that I didn't – just for the hell of it really', said Finn. 'I always thought it would be fun to get people together for a one-off project where you get to become a band for a week or two, play some gigs and just enjoy one another's company.'

FIVE LIVE

7 Worlds' initial activity was a series of five live shows held at the St James Theatre in Auckland, New Zealand, Finn's home town, from the 2nd of April to the 6th of April 2001. The players assembled by Finn's invitation included Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder, ex-Smith Johnny Marr, Ed O'Brien and Phil Selway of Radiohead, Finn's brother Tim, son Liam and his band Betchadupa, Lisa Germano, and Sebastian Steinberg of Soul Coughing. As for the set list, this included Finn faves such as 'Don't Dream It's Over' and 'Weather With You' while Marr served up the long-overdue 'How Soon Is Now'. Much rejoicing ensued and a live album called *7 Worlds Collide: Live At The St James* was released under the aegis of Neil Finn & Friends.

Seven years on, Finn resurrected the project. This time he had Oxfam in mind and determined a more ambitious approach – a three-week recording session where the participants would work together to create brand-new tracks. Marr was back on board, as were the Radiohead guys, Germano and Steinberg. New to the party came Jeff Tweedy, Glenn Kotche, John Stirratt and Pat Sansone of Wilco who were touring NZ at the time, plus K T Tunstall, local musicians Donald McGlashan and Bic Runga, and Jim Scott, most famous for producing Red Hot Chili Peppers and working with Wilco at the time. The tracks were recorded at Roundhead Studios and were released under the title *The Sun Came Out* along with a film of the same name. The movie included footage from three sold-out shows that completed the project in early January 2009 at the Powerstation in Auckland.

'Everyone came down with their families and we nailed an album from scratch in three weeks', explained Finn. 'We tracked 25 songs, using everything from the stairs to the studios. There was music being played in every room at some point. Half of the songs were written during the project so it was a pretty spectacular outpouring of music.'

DESERT SOUNDS

Roundhead was, and still is, Finn's own studio, which he officially opened in June 2007 after a five-year build collaborating with revered designer of sonic spaces, George Augspurger. Named after the earliest painted 'rock art'

PHOTO: WONKER

Eddie Vedder, Pearl Jam's lead singer and member of 7 Worlds Collide, on stage in 2018

The live room in Studio A has curtains and wooden louvers to add richness to the sound. The piano is a Steinway Grand

Tim Finn on stage at the Bar Bodega in Wellington in 2011

Neil Finn's son, Liam, performs in Austin, Texas in 2008 at the South by Southwest festival

Finn on stage (far right) in 2009 with Radiohead's Ed O'Brien (left) and label of the 2001 album *7 Worlds Collide: Live At The St James*

2018
Neil Finn and son Liam collaborate on their first album, *Lightsleeper*. The set goes Top 10 in New Zealand

2019
American singer Pink records sections of *Hurts 2B Human*. It's a No 1 in eight countries on release

2022
Country singer Tami Neilson's album *Kingmaker* goes straight to No 1 on the New Zealand official chart

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(geddit?) in central Sahara from around 9500 BP to 7500 BP (Before Present), Roundhead is located in an art deco-styled building built in 1928 as the Fountain of Friendship Lodge at 151 Newton Rd, Eden Terrace. Roundhead was a huge step up from Finn's home studio. 'I never wanted to be a studio manager', Finn quipped. 'I just wanted somewhere to put all my stuff'.

DESK TO IMPRESS

Roundhead consists of two main studio spaces. The first is Studio A, which features a classic 1974 Neve 8088 console that was moved from Albert Goldman's Bearsville Studios [*HFN* Jul '22] in Woodstock, upstate New York, having been originally built for The Who for their Ramport Studios in south London. Just some of the artists who have used this particular console over the years include the aforementioned Who, Joan Jett, Judas Priest, Motörhead, Jeff Buckley, R.E.M and Alice Cooper. Apparently, it's the only black 8088 ever built.

Roundhead's website describes Studio A as featuring 'spectacular lighting technology to create the perfect ambiance. While it is one of the quietest rooms in New Zealand,

it is a fully customisable acoustic space, with variable surfaces, plus curtains and wooden louvers to add richness to sound'.

TECHY FEELY

Much of the outboard gear to be found in Studio A's main control room was purchased from the Hit Factory in New York [*HFN* Apr '22], yet for all the ace equipment, Finn says he didn't want to build a studio that felt 'too techy... I've been in plenty of studios where you feel like the spaces have been built for engineers, not musicians. I didn't want this place to feel like that'.

> 'The Neve 8088 was the only black one ever built'

With that in mind, he decided to build an additional studio space to aid the creative vibe. 'When you know other people are working hard in the next room, you know you'd better keep it coming', he said. 'There are also those odd times where you meet at the water-cooler or whatever and have a chin-wag – that's a nice feeling.'

The second facility is the Brick Room, which is located underneath Studio A. Sound isolation between the two is provided by a 100mm-thick concrete pad floating on rubber mounts. Described on the website as 'a dynamic space, newly renovated with an API 1608 console at its heart', it includes a live room with a Lipp upright piano and a house drum kit, an isolated vocal booth next to the control room, and the option to connect with two untreated rooms for additional isolation spaces. It's been used for live-to-air performances, album recordings and launches, as well as songwriting sessions. Slowdive are one of the latest acts to broadcast from the Brick Room.

BEYOND THE BUTTONS

Roundhead has become a go-to venue for musicians who want to create in a comfortable space away from the distractions that can hinder recording in big cities in the UK or USA. In Auckland you're out from under the record company's feet and, being on the other side of the world, the chances of being hassled by hangers-on are minimal.

As Jim Scott puts it: 'After working at most of the best recording studios in North America, such as Cello, The Village, Sound City, Sunset Sound, The Record Plant, Oceanway, The Hit Factory and my own PLYRZ Studios, Roundhead Studios blew me away. Amazing facilities, tons of incredible recording gear and musical instruments, and a crack engineering staff'.

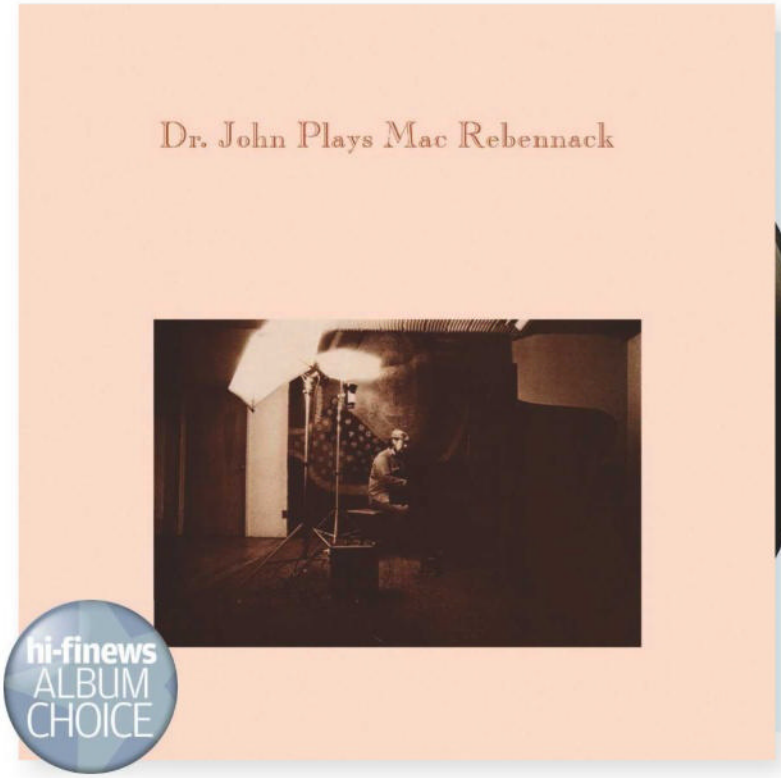
Finn succinctly sums it all up: 'I subscribe to the theory that a studio needs to be built with performance in mind the whole time. Roundhead is primarily about musicians; it's not a technical space. It's been designed to feel good playing music in, and that's been the overriding concern. Nothing else is as important'.

The Brick Room is located underneath Studio A and boasts an API 1608 console (left). The two studios are isolated from each other by a 100mm-thick concrete pad that floats on rubber mounts. The live room (far right) houses a Lipp upright piano

The Neve 8088 console, which today resides in Studio A, at its original home in The Who's Ramport Studios. The man with his hands on the controls is Chief Studio Engineer, the late Dave 'Cy' Langston

Singer Rachel Goswell and guitarist Neil Halstead of Slowdive. In July 2023 the group broadcast live from The Brick Room for student radio station 95bFM

AUDIOPHILE: VINYL



DR. JOHN

Dr. John Plays Mac Rebennack

Sundazed LP5658 2LPs (180g vinyl)

As far as audiophile provenance goes, few can match this release: it was engineered by the late, sorely-missed Dean Roumanis, a true 'golden ears' who worked for Mark Levinson and later Krell. The tracks were recorded on Levinson equipment, including a modified Studer deck, and the resultant sound was that of one of the most realistic, vivid piano sessions ever committed to disc, with Dr. John's raspy vocals matching the veracity. Naturally, it's predominantly New Orleans funk, but there are some surprises, too. This remastered edition adds an entire LP of bonus material, thus its worth has increased exponentially. I'm a long-term Dr. John fan, and this has a place in my 'Audiophile Top 30'. *KK*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

ART FARMER

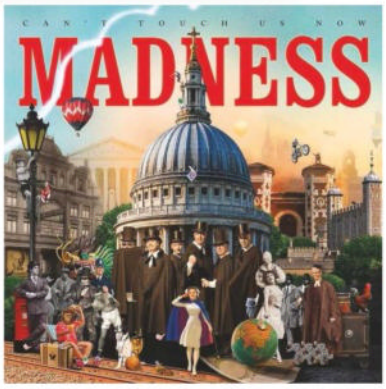
Portrait Of Art Farmer

Craft Recordings CR00605 (180g vinyl)

Cut by Bernie Grundman from the original master tapes, this pressing arrived a tad too late to feature in this month's round-up of new audiophile LPs [p24], but it's precisely the kind of jazz treasure that makes you question what's happened sonically in the past 65 years. Backed by Hank Jones (piano), Addison Farmer (bass) and Roy Haynes (drums), Farmer's the focus but he lets the others cut loose. This LP from 1958 was transitional for Farmer, with a label change and moves between groups, but as a vehicle for his smooth, tasteful style, it's hard to top. Cue up 'The Very Thought Of You' and try *not* to hear Albert King's blues interpretation from a decade later. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



MADNESS

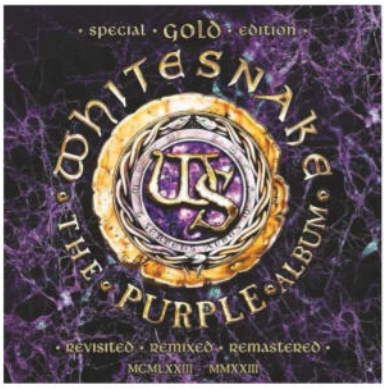
Can't Touch Us Now

Union Square Music/BMG SALVOLP18 (two LPs, half-speed mastered)

Like Whitesnake, Madness has overhauled its entire catalogue, even though this was only released in 2016. Remastered and enriched with liner notes containing fresh interviews, the track listing is identical to the original so you will not need this if you own the earlier issue. As with all Madness titles, it's an effort in the tradition of Blur, Squeeze and most notably The Kinks in oozing a now-disappearing Englishness, or should that be London-ness, so you know what to expect. Also available, should you still have need of any more Madness, is an expanded version of 2012's *Oui Oui Si Si Ja Da Da* [Union Square Music/BMG SALVOLP17] with seven bonus tracks. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



WHITESNAKE

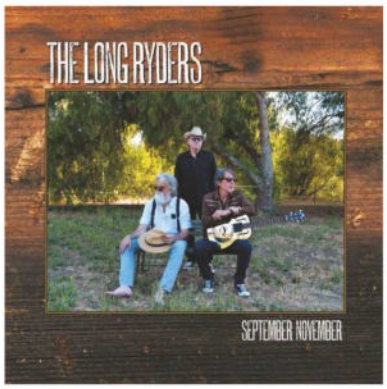
The Purple Album

Rhino RCVV1 725527 (two LPs, purple vinyl)

Is there another case of a lead singer having his current group cover an entire album's worth of songs by his previous outfit? I love the idea of this LP, a 2015 release consisting wholly of remakes of songs from Deep Purple Marks III and IV (1973-1976), when Whitesnake's David Coverdale was in that band. Fans of both groups will have hours of fun comparing the DP originals vs these readings, all exemplars of bombastic, stadium-ready hard rock, newly remixed and remastered in the on-going refurbishment of the Whitesnake canon. Also available is a blue vinyl, expanded, remixed 2LP version of 2008's *Good To Be Bad*, as *Still Good To Be Bad* [Rhino RCV1 695446]. *KK*

Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



CD

THE LONG RYDERS

September November

Cherry Red CDBRED878

Alt-country fans know that one of the genre's most musically valid – and underappreciated – practitioners are the Sid Griffin-led Long Ryders. As is their wont, the songs are imbued with the spirit of The Byrds (especially the plaintive Gene Clark) and The Buffalo Springfield, but the 12 original tunes are not mere pastiches and 'Elmer Gantry Is Alive And Well' merits hitting the 'repeat' button. Yes, it's all a bit time-warp-y, Big Star-meets-*Blood-On-The-Tracks*-Dylan, but what's not to love? Count our blessings: they've only released five albums in 40 years. Sadly, this is their first without the late bassist Tom Stevens, but two tracks form a fitting tribute. *KK*

Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

BD

ALICE COOPER

Billion Dollar Babies

Rhino/Quadio BA2 2685 (Blu-ray quadraphonic)

What you lose with this true-to-the-quad-CD4-mix of 1973 is the over-the-top packaging of an LP, but the fun is in the immersive soundstage if you've only ever heard it in stereo. I'm not enough of a 5.1 devotee to insist on remixing 4-channel originals to the later form; rather, I'm a purist who thinks this the album should be heard as intended if you want surround sound. It gave us the anthem-like 'Elected' and AC's signature tune of 'No More Mr Nice Guy', and the whole affair is so rocking that it's no surprise the album hit No 1 in the USA and the UK. Trigger warning: some song titles will terrify snowflakes (who ought to avoid Alice Cooper regardless). *KK*

Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

SA

BD

HENNING SOMMERRO

Borders

2L 2L-173-SABD (SACD + Blu-ray)

Some 2L releases fill me with dread, like watching a Scandinavian murder mystery with emphasis on the bleak. This one, however, comes across like the soundtrack to a marginally less troubling saga, not least because of the assuaging presence of harmonica. As with others from the series, the themes are mythical, rooted in European history. Composer Sommerro has devised three works for soloist and orchestra, but the liner notes will disabuse you of any notion that this is a funfest. It is, though, more grand and cinematic than its label mates, and you will have a blast exploring the various multichannel *vs* stereo mixes and resolution types. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

BRYAN FERRY

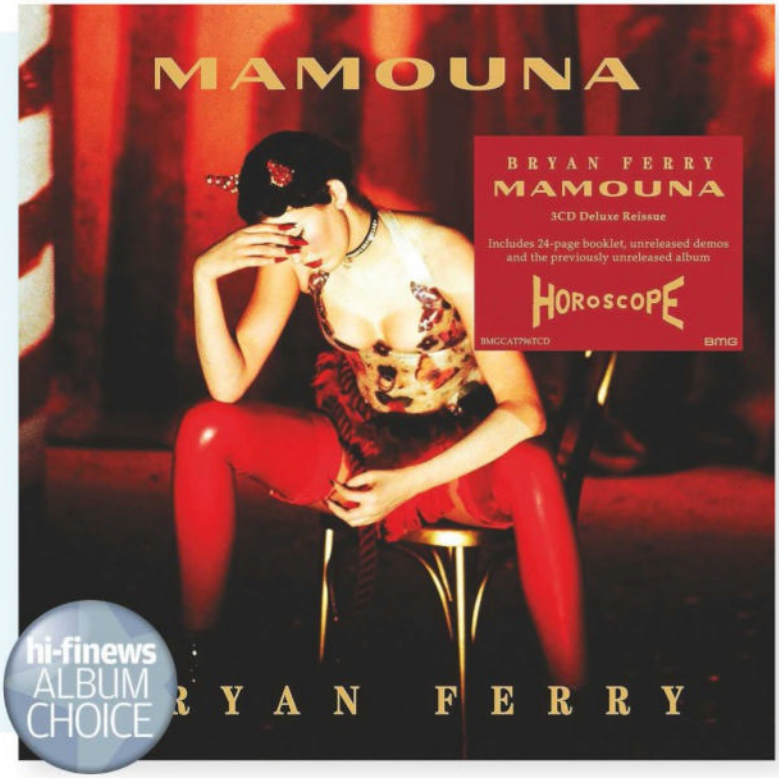
Mamouna

BMG BMGCAT796TCD (three discs)

Ferry always delivers lush-sounding albums, especially when he's in a dark-ish mood, and this expanded 30th anniversary version of 1994's *Mamouna* is no exception. His first self-penned release, it took six years to finish, and this superb 3CD set sandwiches the remastered, ten-track original with the unreleased *Horoscope*, with two tracks that later appeared on *Mamouna*, and a collection called *Sketches*. This provides ten demos and works-in-progress used on both *Horoscope* and *Mamouna*, as well as one for 2014's *Avonmore*. This set begs questions, such as why was *Horoscope* left in the can, the booklet providing only lyrics and track info. That said, here are albums Ferry scholars will relish. *KK*

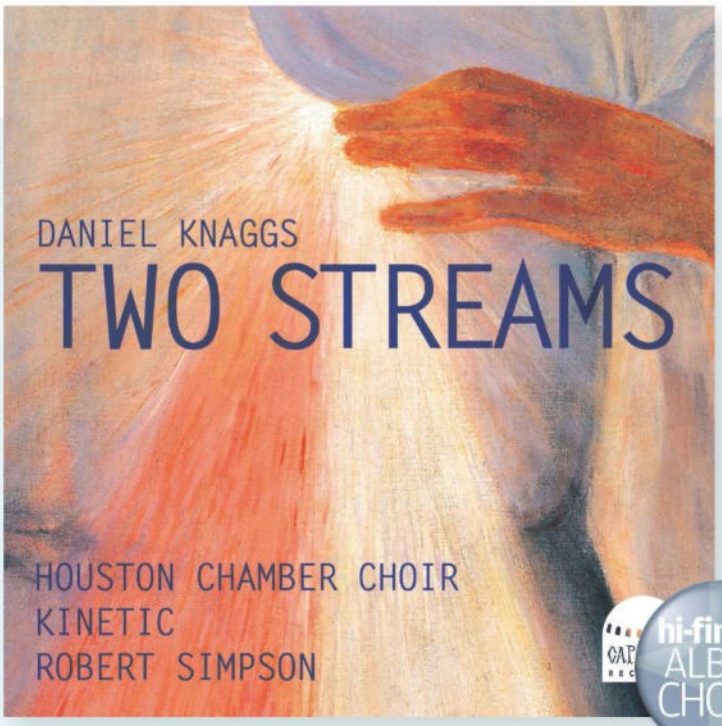
Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



CD

HI-RES DOWNLOADS



DANIEL KNAGGS

Two Streams (192kHz/24-bit, FLAC)

www.cappellarecords.com; Cappella Records CR-429

Like me, you'll be forgiven for not being familiar with Daniel Knaggs' 2021 cantata for voices and strings, based on the messages received in prayer by Polish nun Faustina Kowalska – this is, after all, a world premiere recording, performed by the excellent Houston Chamber Choir plus soloists, and string ensemble Kinetic. And it turns out this is both a striking piece, drawing on musical styles from the medieval to the modern, and a fabulous recording, with a simple but enveloping sound evoking the contemplative nature of the work. Dedicated to Knaggs' father, who didn't live to hear the finished piece, *Two Streams* conveys Kowalska's message that peace cannot be achieved without mercy. Moreover, it does so with amazing vocal and instrumental intensity, diligently captured by the recording team in the generous acoustic of the Stude Concert Hall of Houston's Rice University. *AE*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

EDWARD VESALA

Nan Madol (96kHz/24-bit, WAV)

www.ecmrecords.com; ECM 1077

Recorded in 1974 and originally released in 1976, this 'big band' jazz album carries its age, getting on for half a century, very well – it's still powerful, dramatic, and fascinating throughout. This was Finnish percussionist Vesala's debut album for the ECM label, and he certainly arrived with a bang. The title means 'spaces between' (or may refer to mysterious ruins in Micronesia), and the set covers a lot of ground, taking in European and Asian influences, motifs drifting in and out, and the aural landscape constantly changing. True, it's not exactly a foot-tapper, but its experimental and improvisational tracks find the musicians bouncing off each other, all captured in another of those consistently fine ECM recordings. The set's masterwork? The near-13 minute 'Areous Vlor Tal', combining mystical sounds with driving rhythms in one huge, delirious wall of music. *AE*

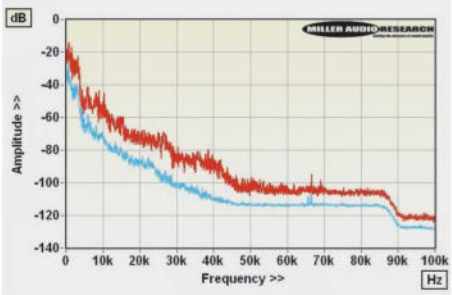
Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

OUR PROMISE

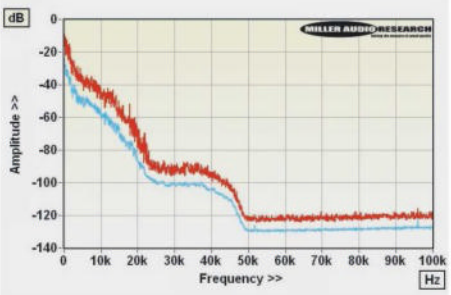
Following our Investigation feature [*HFN* Jun '11] where we examined the claimed quality of 'high-res' downloads, *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* continues to measure the true sample rate and bit-depth of HD music downloads. The Graphs show peak [red] and RMS [blue] spectra. These unique reviews will be a regular source of information for those seeking new and remastered recordings offered at high sample rates and with the promise of delivering the very best sound quality. (Note: an asterisk in the heading denotes a technical reservation – see Lab text). **PM**

LAB REPORT



Tracks/parts 3, 6 and 13 peak very close to the digital limit and the ~88kHz filtering is more likely to have occurred with 176.4kHz sampling. Noise is slightly high too but dynamic range is still wide and spurious peaks well suppressed. **PM**

LAB REPORT



The 96kHz sampling of this analogue recording is more than sufficient to capture the mid-20kHz tape bandwidth, while quantisation to *below* –1dBFS prevents overload. Dynamic range is good too – a fine ECM transcription. **PM**

INGER MARIE GUNDERSEN

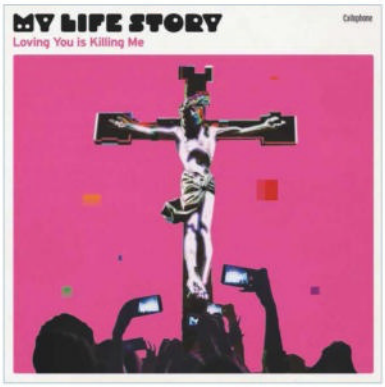
Five Minutes (96kHz/24-bit, FLAC)

www.sundance.dk; Stunt Records/Sundance STUCD23082

Norwegian singer Inger Marie Gundersen's first album in five years – and her sixth since she embarked on a solo recording career – covers familiar songs associated with the likes of Rod Stewart, Paul McCartney, Dire Straits and Elvis Costello. Working with producer Espen Lind to select and hone her interpretations, she brings a fresh approach to each track, not least due to her dark, languorous voice. For example, her take on 'Sailing' – yes, the massive (and massively overproduced) Rod Stewart hit – strips the song back to its romantic roots, while 'Why Worry' couldn't be further from the Dire Straits original in its breathy rendition. Even Richards and Jagger's 'Wild Horses' gets the Inger Marie treatment with more than modest success. So, while the singer's voice is sometimes a little recessed in the mix, a result of that dark tone, there's much to like in this very intimate presentation. *AE*

Sound Quality: 80%

0 - - - - - - - - 100



MY LIFE STORY

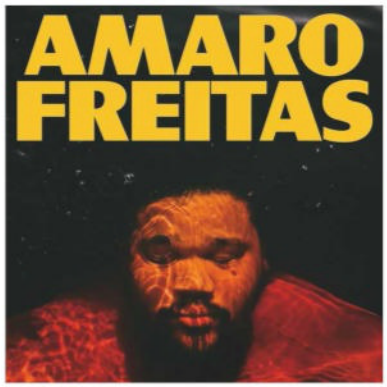
Loving You Is Killing Me (96kHz/24-bit, WAV)*

www.exilophone.com; Exilophone Records MLS16

Formed in Southend in 1984, My Life Story have gone through a variety of iterations, from Britpop pioneers to a big ensemble with strings and brass, and from collaborations with the likes of Morrissey, The Pogues and Marc Almond to appearances at Glastonbury and the Reading Festival. Touring ended in 2001, then started again in 2016, and now the band is back with overtones of the tight songwriting and clever lyrics of The Divine Comedy. Written by founding frontman Jake Shillingford with Nick Evans, and produced with excellent weight and clarity by Ben Hillier, the new set doesn't have a duff track among its ten numbers. Let the infectious sound wash over you, or delve deeper into the lyrics, apparently covering 'empathy, profanity, vaingloriousness, coercive behaviour and naturism'. Either way, this is a hugely rewarding set. *AE*

Sound Quality: 80%

0 - - - - - - - - 100



AMARO FREITAS

Y'Y (88.2kHz/24-bit, WAV)*

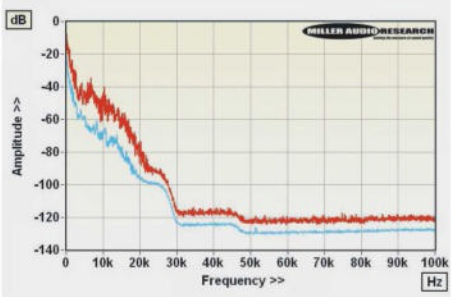
www.psychic-hotline.net; Psychic Hotline n/a cat no.

Get in touch with nature via this new set by Brazilian jazz composer and pianist Amaro Freitas, who says his album is a 'homage to the forest, especially the Amazon Forest, and the rivers of Northern Brazil', and that it's 'a call to live, feel, respect, and care for nature, recognising it as our ancestor'. Joined here by musicians including flautist Shabaka Hutchings, drummer Hamid Drake and bassist Aniel Someillan, Freitas has created a series of pieces that carry the Brazilian jazz heritage lightly while creating captivating sonic pictures from the opening – and very short – 'Mapinguari' to the breezy, driving 'Encantados' ending the set in toe-tapping fashion. The theme may be worthy, but there's nothing dull or preachy about the writing or playing here – it's served well by a tight, crisp sound, revealing the contribution of each of the performers, but note PM's caveat. *AE*

Sound Quality: 80%

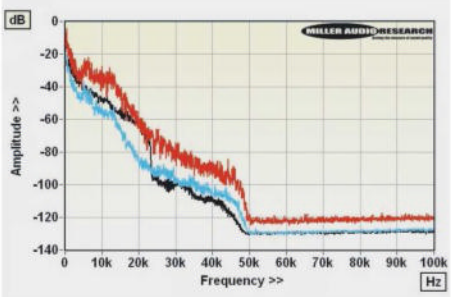
0 - - - - - - - - 100

LAB REPORT



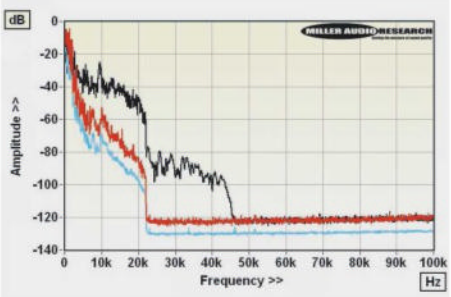
Recording information is sparse/non-existent but while this is a 96kHz file there's clearly little bandwidth beyond 28kHz – an analogue recording, perhaps? Either way, dynamic range is good and there's no peak-level compression. PM

LAB REPORT



While this file will light up the '96kHz' indicator on your DAC, and trk 10 looks the 'real deal', most are sampled at 48kHz [black spectrum]. All tracks peak at a high –0.1dBFS, and dynamic range is squeezed, but are otherwise 'clean'. PM

LAB REPORT



Although this will appear as an 88.2kHz file on your streaming device/DAC it is, in fact, an upsampled 44.1kHz rendering. Moreover as all tracks are normalised to a hot peak of 0.0dBFS, this can cause digital clipping in some DACs [black]. PM

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LAETITIA SADIER

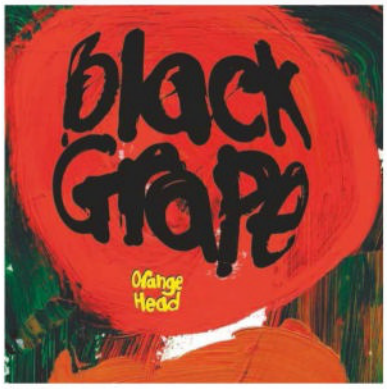
Rooting For Love

Duophonic DS45CD62; LP: DS33LP62

Sadier is best known as lead singer with Stereolab, where she explores a retro-futurism with hints of Françoise Hardy and the vintage electronics of Jean Jacques Perrey – her soft, characterful voice charms the listener into a lyrical zone where Marxism meets existentialism as serious fun. Here, her messages of empowerment and positivity are cut with wry humour as she plays the 'famous linguist's wife' on the buoyant, funky 'Don't Forget You're Mine'. She's a really imaginative arranger, using trombone, vibes, keyboards and samples to colour her intricate songs, which range from groovy pop to moodier settings, and her voice is complemented brilliantly by a mixed choir on 'Who + What'. *MB*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - 100



BLACK GRAPE

Orange Head

DGAFF DGAFF1CDX; LP: DGAFF1LP

On 'Button Eyes' a croaky Shaun Ryder sounds like an English tourist stumbling into a Cuban karaoke bar, warning 'I can't sing', before getting sweary over a blazing horn section and beats that land between rock and hip-hop. Kermit, the other half of this chalk-and-cheese duo, applies his more supple tones to the Morricone-esque rap requiem, 'In The Ground'. The lyrics are surreal throughout, and Orange Head is punchy, funny and full of weird character. 'I never ever fed the wolf because it would chew my mind', Kermit sings on 'Milk' and Ryder proudly proclaims, 'We're getting old like The Rolling Stones' over the electronic dance grooves of 'Panda'. *MB*

Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

EPIC45

You'll Only See Us When The Light Has Gone

Wayside And Woodland W&W067 (CD or LP)

This album feels like a soundtrack to land on the edges of towns, once pristine, now sullied by human encroachment. On it, Rob Glover and Ben Holton peer into the cracks in contemporary British society, searching for a sense of purpose and identity. Whereas Sleaford Mods fill that void with invective, epic45 take a more melancholic tack. On 'New Town Faded', with melodies reminiscent of Talk Talk and Tears For Fears, they sing 'Everybody is running, looking for some meaning', over spangly guitars, warm keyboards and deft drum patterns. It's a lament for a lost Albion, which strikes a chord in these troubled times, but also carries a feeling of hope. *MB*

Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

THE FALLEN LEAVES

Simple Songs For Complex People

Parliament PARL12CD; LP: PARL12LP

Guitarist Rob Symmons was originally in UK punk pioneers Subway Sect and his distinctive, edgy playing drives this tight, tough combo. Here they've produced a heartfelt love letter to the '60s. There are hints of The Who and Merseybeat, while 'Green Eyes FC' rekindles the spirit of The Small Faces, and drummer Brett 'Buddy' Ascott shakes some action on 'Rosalina', a not-so-distant cousin to The Pretty Things' 'Rosalin'. Best think of it all as some of the building blocks of rock 'n' roll reconfigured and vividly recorded. And there's a touch of psychedelia on 'In My Room' when a mysterious female visitor opens the doorway to singer Rob Green's mind. *MB*

Sound Quality: 80%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

ORIGIN LIVE

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– Hi-Fi Choice, 2023

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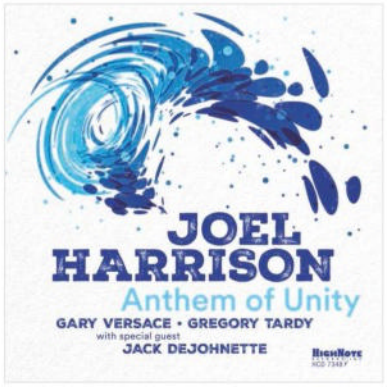

JOEL HARRISON
Anthem Of Unity

HighNote Records HCD7348

Versatile and much-recorded guitarist Joel Harrison joins forces here with Hammond virtuoso Gary Versace, but this is no ordinary organ-combo album as it brings together four diverse and long-respected talents. On tenor sax and (occasionally) clarinet is Gregory Tardy, who combines limitless technique, a lithe way with melody and a warm human sound; on drums the great Jack DeJohnette, who despite having been born in 1942, has never sounded less like a veteran. Apart from a jaunty take on Rollins' 'Doxy' and a playful 'Times They Are A-Changing', you get six originals, all full of ideas, ear-catching melodies and engaging rhythms. It's absorbing and enjoyable. *SH*

Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

ETHAN IVERSON
Technically Acceptable

Blue Note 5581218

After 17 years as pianist with The Bad Plus (which continues in a different form), Iverson made a duo album with saxophonist Mark Turner before teaming with stalwarts Larry Grenadier and Jack DeJohnette for his Blue Note debut [*Every Note Is True*, 2022]. Now we hear his new trio, with Thomas Morgan on bass and Kush Abadey at the drums, again exploring jazz history with twists and shocks – as when the title track's cool 1950s locked-hands groove gives way to a whimsical bridge. There's a pop-styled 'Killing Me Softly' and an outlandish 'Round Midnight' with Rob Schwimmer on theremin, and Iverson's craggy piano sonata concludes a constantly surprising album. *SH*

Sound Quality: 80%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

RYMDEN
Valleys & Mountains

Jazzland Recordings 3779599; LP: 3779580

Formed by Norwegian pianist, composer, producer and Jazzland label founder Bugge Wesseltoft, Rymden ('Space') is a Nordic supergroup, as bassist Dan Berglund and drummer Magnus Öström were in Sweden's mould-breaking Esbjörn Svensson Trio (e.s.t.) until Svensson's untimely death in 2008. This latest exploration starts with 'The Hike', tramping to a steady rock beat with a bluesy guest solo by guitarist John Scofield. Heavy on electronics and hypnotic rhythms, the trio look to inner as well as outer space, 'Milam Bardo' referring to the Buddhist dream state, before we get to the mountains, the valleys and, finally, 'Himmel' (heaven). It's a compelling journey. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

ERSKINE & KAVUMA
Ultrasound

Banger Factory Records BF006 (CD and LP)

Mainspring of London's Banger Factory collective and founder of the label, trumpeter Mark Kavuma is ravishing on 'The Loneliest', a ballad by US bassist Russell Hall (who'd recorded it with Banger Factory saxist Ruben Fox). This live-sounding quintet album captures his post-lockdown return to the studio of Theo Erskine, who's heard here as saxophonist and co-leader. Bassist Michael Shrimpling wrote the Monkish 'It' while pianist Noah Stoneman, distilling Monk through his own fabulous harmonic sense, contributed 'June'. This gets its happy pulse from Empirical drummer Shane Forbes, whose great solo also lights up the fast 'Return Of Johnny Bravo'. Finally, 'The Day After Tomorrow' jazz-waltzes into a bright future. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

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BERGEN PO, *ET AL*/SIR MARK ELDER

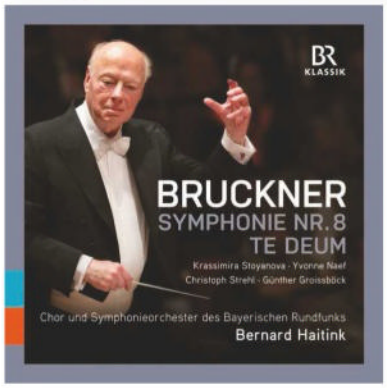
Delius: A Mass of Life

LAWO LWC1265 (two discs; downloads to 192kHz/24-bit resolution)

Does Delius's magnum opus stand up against other turn-of-the-century, soul-seeking choral epics such as *Sea Symphony* and *Gurrelieder*? Recordings, let alone performances, have been so few and far between that a fair judgement has been almost impossible. Freed from dusty sound (Beecham/Del Mar) and worthy but dull interpretation (Hill/Hickox), the score gleams and dances as never before under Elder, who directs with the blazing authority of his best nights in the pit. The engineering picks out the glittering French accents of Delius's orchestra, brings huge choral forces back and forth, and sets an opulent solo cast (led by Roderick Williams) in a realistic perspective. Unmissable for Delius lovers and sceptics alike. *PQ*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - 100



BAVARIAN RSO/BERNARD HAITINK

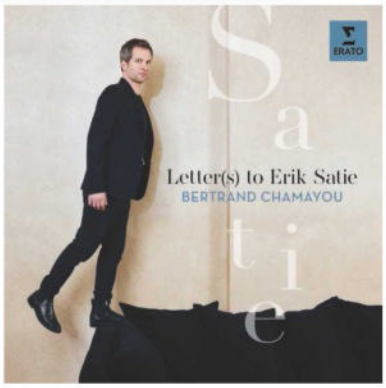
Bruckner: Symphony No 8*; Te Deum

*BR-Live 900212 (two discs; *available singly at 96kHz/24-bit res)*

When Bruckner is often manipulated as the vehicle for a maestro's ego, it's refreshing to remind ourselves how powerfully and truthfully this music can speak of life-and-death struggle and hard-won triumph. Longer than other Haitink Eighths, this 1993 concert version unfolds with an inexorable but not inflexible pulse, always animated by the fateful double-dotted head motif. There's a rounder, more human and tender profile to the BRSO's playing than Wand ever sought. The *Te Deum* (rec. 2010) similarly probes the elements of doubt and fear in both text and setting with a dark-hued palette. Weighty, substantial choral forces; a well-balanced solo team. *PQ*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - 100



BERTRAND CHAMAYOU

Satie: Gnossiennes, Gymnopédies, *etc*; Cage: Dream, In A Landscape, *etc*

Warner 5054197696442s (downloads to 96kHz/24-bit resolution)

Producer Damien Quintard registers every last flicker of phrase and decay. He goes right inside the piano for this complementary pairing of Cage and Satie. The running order flicks distractedly between composers and sets, so that familiar pieces appear from new angles. Cage emerges as a natural inheritor of Satie's forms, which are not so much developed as assembled and polished from lucid dreams of Debussyan harmony. Prepared by a honky-tonk toccatina, the final piece here is also the longest, Cage's 9-minute *Dream*, not demanding patience but bestowing it on the listener. *PQ*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

BORYS FEDOROV, ANNA FEDOROVA, MIKHAIL & DANA ZEMTSOV

Chopin, Roslavets, Fedorov, Zemtsov, *etc*

Channel Classics CCS44523 (downloads to 192kHz/24-bit res)

Here are two musical Ukrainian families, reunited in the Netherlands, recalling happier days with old and new pieces. It's a charming and original concept, taking in bittersweet sketches of childhood by Borys Fedorov, a haunting *Elegy* of Glazunov and a nostalgic Silver-Age Viola Sonata by Roslavets. Folksong, Chopin and Yiddish prayer arrangements are brief and spirited. The Fedorovs present Scriabin's only two-piano work, a surprisingly innocent sounding *Fantasy*. Everyone joins in with bassist Nicolas Schwartz for a spicy *Tango Suite* by Mikhail Zemtsov. The fun they had recording it is palpable, and infectious. *PQ*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

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Barry Fox
Technology journalist
Barry Fox trained in electronics with the RAF and worked as a patent agent, but he gave that up to enter journalism. He is one of the world's top technology writers

Secrets and spies

Barry Fox recounts the strange-but-true story of how the BBC and the Post Office deployed 78rpm disc recorders to aid Britain's war effort – and kept quiet about it for over 60 years

Mention bugging and we think of radio mics, parabolic gun arrays, spies with pocket Nagras and Richard Nixon turning the White House into a clandestine recording studio. But what happened before Major John T Mullen grabbed a couple of the Magnetophon tape recorders, used during the Second World War to time-shift Hitler's speeches, and shipped them back to the US where knock-off tape recorders were built that let Bing Crosby play more golf by time-shifting his radios shows?

ABOVE: Transcripts of secretly recorded conversations – Alan Brody's *Operation Epsilon* and *Farm Hall* by Katherine Moar while Helen Fry's *The M Room* has pages of verbatim transcripts

WAR STORIES

Before Mullen, bugging relied on bulky studio microphones and 78rpm disc recorders, and two stage plays with the same pre-tape bugging theme have been staged in London recently. Both have near identical dialogue because they are based on transcriptions of bugging discs that were made nearly 80 years ago.

After tests in the Tower of London during the Second World War, bugging centres – or M [for Mic] Rooms – were set up on the outskirts of London at Trent Park, Latimer House, Wilton Park Estate and Farm Hall near Cambridge. Trent, Latimer and Wilton housed captured German troops and officers. Farm Hall was home to Operation Epsilon, with German physicists who'd worked on a uranium 'machine'.

Alan Brody's *Operation Epsilon* opened in the US around ten years ago and came to the Southwark Playhouse in 2023. The slightly less ambitious *Farm Hall* by Katherine Moar was staged a few months earlier at the Jermyn Street Theatre in London. Both are well worth seeing if revived. An excellent book, *The M Room*, by Helen Fry, tells the story more fully.

The original bugging projects were run by Thomas Kendrick, a military man who had helped set up the Bletchley Park code-cracking centre. He entrusted the technology design to the Post Office Research Department at Dollis Hill and the BBC, who approached RCA, the Radio Corporation of America. Work started in late 1939, soon after war was declared. Everyone involved had to sign the Official Secrets Act.

> 'The M Rooms generated over 100,000 transcripts'

The first installation at Trent Park started with 15 RCA 88A pressure mics, as used in radio studios, nine portable disc recorders of the type designed for war correspondents, and (for the time) high-quality headphones. Over 500 12in double-sided acetate-coated metal discs were bought in, with a mix of steel and sapphire cutting styli and soft playback needles. Everything was shipped over from New Jersey with special import licences to ensure no prying en route.

The microphones were very carefully hidden in light fittings, plant pots, a billiard table and false ceilings fashioned to match the original architecture. All the workers also had to sign the Act.

Playback turntables had variable speed controls to make transcription easier. Kendrick soon ran out of Brits to recruit as transcribers because they had to understand and translate technical terms about radar, rockets and atom-splitting; by 1942 he was using German-speaking refugees. The listeners were secreted in basement rooms behind false walls. To save scarce discs, they only lowered the cutting stylus when the conversation sounded worth recording.

CODE OF SILENCE

Scientist Kurt Diebner was secretly recorded saying: 'I wonder whether there are microphones installed here?'. Colleague Werner Heisenberg replied: 'Oh no, they're not as cute as all that'.

The 12in discs recorded seven minutes of audio, which took over an hour to transcribe and translate. Historian Helen Fry estimates that until they finally shut down in 1946, the M rooms generated over 100,000 transcripts that remained secret until 1999. Mastermind Thomas Kendrick died in 1972 and never spoke about his work. Well over 1000 of his staff and colleagues kept silent too.

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Barry Willis
Journalist for top American audio-video publications
While his main interest is high-end audio, Barry Willis also writes about the culinary industry, visual art and theatre for a huge variety of US newspapers and magazines

Still making sense

A famed concert movie by an Oscar-winning director has been reissued with remastered visuals and a Dolby Atmos soundmix, and it's so good **Barry Willis** can't stop talking about it...

This past autumn, approximately 40 years after its first release, *Stop Making Sense* came roaring back to select cinemas, to near-universal acclaim. Jonathan Demme's ultimate concert film chronicles art-rock band Talking Heads at the height of their frenetic creativity. Pieced together from several performances at the same venue, the film opens with lead singer/band founder David Byrne solo on a bare stage, accompanying himself on guitar with rhythm supplied by a boom box.

RIGHT: Talking Heads pictured in 1986 (l-r) David Byrne, Chris Frantz, Tina Weymouth and Jerry Harrison. A newly restored 4K version of the band's concert film *Stop Making Sense* with a Dolby Atmos soundtrack was released in cinemas in September 2023

PERFORMANCE ART

After the opening song 'Psycho Killer', band members appear: bassist Tina Weymouth, drummer Chris Frantz, keyboardist Bernie Worrell, percussionist Steve Scales, guitarist/keyboardist Jerry Harrison, guitarist Alex Weir, and singers/dancers Lynn Mabry and Edna Holt. They come onstage one-by-one, as black-clad stage hands assemble the set. It's one of the film's many moments of conceptual brilliance and is matched by the musical and performance brilliance of one of the quirkiest bands of the late 20th century.

Talking Heads were unlike any group that had come before or since. In an era of rock-arena poseurs, big hair, garish costumes, and overwrought but hollow-at-the-core productions, they delivered powerful commentary on everything in contemporary life. They drew from sources as diverse as snake-handling Pentecostal religious practices, black gospel musical traditions, and ongoing social problems like the worldwide fear of nuclear annihilation that permeated the Reagan-Thatcher-Gorbachev period.

Widespread anxiety – cue 'Life During Wartime' – was reflected in the eclectic band's songs and performances, especially Byrne's faux-psychotic vocals and movements. These were captured beautifully by Demme, and the film makes abundantly clear the band's tremendous versatility. Their energy and cohesion are astounding. Mabry and Holt are spectacular dancers and glorious backing vocalists, and the entire band – Demme gives each Talking Head more than appreciative screen time – is a stunning case of the whole being far larger than the sum of its parts.

> 'They were unlike any group before or since'

Stop Making Sense has been re-released several times since its 1984 debut, but the latest edition stands far above its predecessors. Newly remastered, its visual impact is boosted by superior colour saturation, focus, and detail. Engaging on both the macro and micro levels, it's a beautiful work that adheres exactly to the original while improving on it in every way.

LIVE AND KICKING

Supervised by Talking Heads original member Jerry Harrison, the film's new Dolby Atmos soundtrack is crisp, punchy, and completely engaging without any annoying artefacts so often inserted into remasterings by engineers eager to put their personal stamp on iconic recordings. In fact, the new *Stop Making Sense* has the first Atmos soundtrack I've heard that isn't riddled with gimmicks.

I saw the theatrical release twice in ten days, in two different theatres. The first was a capacious 500+ seat venue, while the second was a smaller art-house affair seating maybe 300. The sound was better in the larger space while the video was better in the smaller one. A friend measured the SPLs, where the average was 105+dBA (a level with the potential for damage at ~30min exposure). I would have dialed it back a few dB. Even so, there was a palpable sense of realism with crowd noise, and the experience came close to being at a live event.

MUST-SEE MOVIE

Director Jonathan Demme passed away in April, 2017. He did not live to see his *magnum opus* lovingly honoured as it is in this new release. It made strong cultural ripples in October and November, but there's some chance that the film may still be playing at a cinema near you.

The 40th anniversary edition of *Stop Making Sense* is a must-see – if not on the big screen, then in private comfort. It's all the justification anyone needs for a great home theatre system.

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Andrew Everard
Reviewer/writer
Andrew Everard has reviewed consumer electronics for over 30 years and is still effortlessly enthusiastic about new developments, discovering new kit – and music

Don't worry, be 'appy

Choosing a network player? Don't just look at the hardware spec, says **Andrew Everard**. If you're having a demo, dig into the app that 'drives' it, and consider how comfortable it makes you feel

The other day, with just a little time on my hands, I took a few moments out from downloading the control app for an inbound network player onto my phone, and did a quick headcount of how many similar pieces of software I had cluttering up my screens. The result rather shocked me – I had no fewer than 33 of them, including the new one, testament to a life spent with an almost continuous procession of network-capable audio gear passing through my listening room.

ABOVE: The Technics Audio Centre app (left) and WiiM Home app (right). Controlling apps vary, so before you buy a network player make sure the app it uses delivers the information you need

FINGERTIP CONTROL

That's not a problem most users will ever face – chances are you'll have a single device, and so just the control app for that one on your phone, or even better on a tablet, for a much more convenient user-experience, not to mention being easier on the eye. But finding my phone packed with music-playing apps, both old and new, got me thinking about just how large a part the quality of the control software plays in the user-experience of enjoying network-sourced music.

Now some manufacturers will have you believe you can enjoy these products using just a conventional remote handset and the display provided on the front of the hardware. But let me tell you from experience that down that path lies only frustration and eye-strain. Unless you sit right on top of the player, rather than using it across the room as most of us will, the remote control is only good for making the most basic of adjustments. There's so much information involved in streaming, whether from a local NAS or an online service, that even the largest, most comprehensive display – think the likes of HiFi Rose's players – is hard to read across the room. Scrolling through a track library is a pain with a remote handset.

> 'Even the largest display is hard to read across a room'

For those reasons, a control app is the weapon of choice, and even if you're a smartphone denier, it won't cost you a fortune to get kitted out. If the price of a refurbished iPad, starting from £170 or so, is too rich for you, then Android tablets from the likes of Lenovo can be picked up for the right side of £100, and will do the job pretty well. Just make sure that your network player of choice will play nicely with the Android operating system as a few are very Apple-centric.

As far as app choice is concerned, many streamers will work perfectly well with third-party apps such as – checks phone – the Linn-developed Kinsky, JuPnP, mConnect, Bubble UPnP, nPlayer, DLNA Player and – well, there are lots of them. Indeed some makers of network streaming player hardware save themselves the trouble of building their own app by suggesting buyers use one of these third-party solutions.

Yet it's best when the hardware manufacturer provides its own app for the job, as it will (hopefully) be optimised for the equipment you want to control. Familiarity suggests to me that the Focal & Naim app, despite the extra clutter introduced to support both brands, is especially well-sorted, and is constantly being updated with bug-fixes and more. Other standouts include the Lightning DS app for Auralic; the latest Technics Audio Centre app I've been playing with of late; the BluOS, HEOS and Sonos apps for those wireless multiroom systems; and even the app for the budget-priced WiiM streamers, which delivers a smooth, easily-understood interface.

PLAY-FI, HO-HUM...

Less impressive? Well, there are still apps prone to drop-outs and freezes, and there's a special corner of Hell reserved for those products I've reviewed based around the DTS Play-Fi platform, which I rarely got to Play with any kind of consistency, and always sounded less than Fi when it did work. I'm glad to see that at least one manufacturer championing it in its previous models appears to have moved on with its latest release. Not before time...

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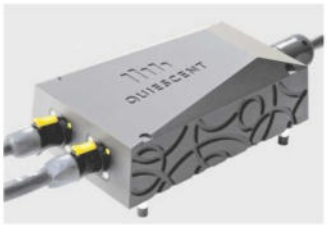

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Peter Quantrill
Music Journalist
Peter Quantrill has been writing about music for magazines and record labels for 30 years. When not hunched over a CD player, he'll be at a concert, or the cricket

The art of remembering

Recent reissues of recordings by both Anshel Brusilow and Benjamin Britten throw open new windows on musical life in Britain and America during the 1960s, says **Peter Quantrill**

The name of Anshel Brusilow is likely to stir only a faint glimmer of memory even among dedicated collectors. Brusilow, who died in 2018 at the age of 89, was a violinist turned conductor from a Ukrainian-Jewish family. His parents emigrated in flight from a Cossack pogrom, and settled in the US. He studied violin with Zimbalist and conducting with Monteux, who advanced his protégé's career as a soloist until Brusilow decided to marry against Monteux's wishes.

ABOVE: Hard-boiled Brusilow – the foibles and talents of the American violinist and conductor are revealed by a tell-all memoir and a new set of his RCA recordings

IMMEDIATELY MUSICAL

Eventually joining the Philadelphia Orchestra, Brusilow became 'Ormandy's leader' until that relationship went south, too. Brusilow had set up his own orchestra, the Chamber Symphony of Philadelphia (CSOP), and Ormandy apparently became jealous of its success. All this would be history pure and simple, but for the new release on RCA of Brusilow's legacy on record.

It's a small box by modern standards, just six CDs of seven original albums ranging from a leftfield Haydn symphony (No. 60) to a lugubriously spiritual cantata by Brusilow's friend, Richard Yardumian. Every performance is immediately musical in its instincts, and polished in that recognisable post-war US style, though not aspiring to the diamond-cut edges of Szell in Cleveland or Solti in Chicago.

True, none of them could be counted 'library choices' unless your collection isn't complete without the Yardumian. That said, you'd go a long way to improve on the accounts of Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and Strauss's suite from *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* in the box. Marrying affection to precision, they are exemplary as demonstrations of a modern neoclassicism. Perhaps Brusilow would have been perfect for Prokofiev's First Symphony or Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* but I guess we'll never know.

> 'Rehearsal excerpts take us back to January 1963'

Once the RCA box is 'read' alongside Brusilow's late-in-life memoir, though, it shines a new light on mid-century American music culture. Published in 2015, and evidently compiled with some patience on the part of co-author Robin Underdahl, *Shoot The Messenger* takes an entertainingly candid and combative tone from the outset. Brusilow had opened a lot of scores through his long career, personal as well as musical, and was determined to settle them all, having outlived his antagonists.

The book and the compilation together bring Brusilow to life. Each enhances the other, so that the CDs acquire significance less as individual interpretations of Brahms or Tchaikovsky than as a record of a performing culture now made foreign by the passing of time.

Take another example: the latest reissue of Britten's *War Requiem* on Decca. From a commercial perspective, like Brusilow on RCA, it's one more attempt by a record label to extract value from the 'long tail' of their catalogue. The spatial audio remastering appeals to one particular demographic, which listens via streaming, and mostly on headphones.

FOR THE RECORD

More to the point for *HFN* readers, I fancy, are the premium-priced physical formats, on Super Audio CD and especially on LP, where the recording itself becomes just one element of a cultural artefact. Memoirs from Decca's engineering team, session photos, and reproductions of the original artwork, add up to a cultural history of *War Requiem*.

Rehearsal excerpts take us back to January 1963 and Kingsway Hall: there is the composer-conductor coaxing players and choristers and soloists each according to their needs and expectations, all in the clipped English of that awkwardly never-quite-Establishment figure. Records record more than just music, and these particular records remind us that 'the music itself' will always be a chimera.

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Steve Harris
Contributor
Steve Harris edited *Hi-Fi News* between 1986 and 2005. He loves jazz, blues music, vinyl and vintage hi-fi and anything that makes good music come to life

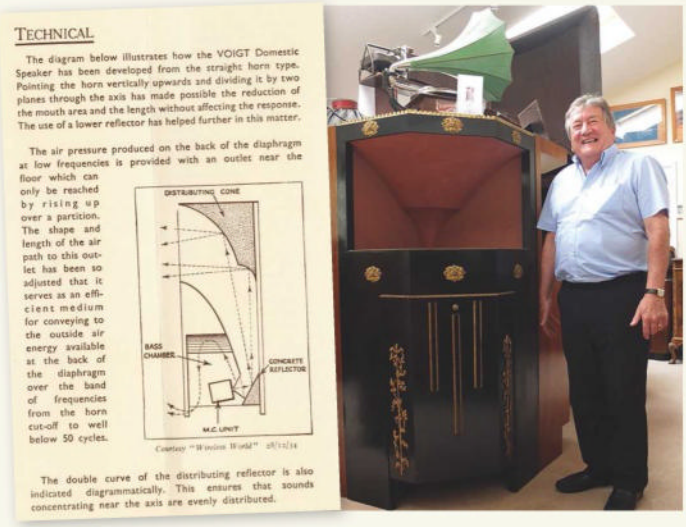
His master's Voigt

The work of legendary loudspeaker designer Paul Voigt lives on thanks to the dedication of collector – and now speaker maker – John Howes. **Steve Harris** can't wait to read his book

It's 100 years since the invention of the moving-coil loudspeaker, a huge leap forward from existing moving-iron types, and still the dominant principle today. British audio pioneer Paul Voigt applied for a patent on the 20th of May 1924, but he was too late, because an American patent had been filed just weeks earlier, on the 27th of March.

Voigt, working at the Edison Bell company, designed a complete recording system including a moving-coil disc cutter. He patented the tractrix speaker horn contour in 1927. When Edison Bell folded in 1933, Voigt set up his own company, Voigt Patents Ltd. His horn speaker, with its four-foot square mouth, was supplied to cinemas and dancehalls.

RIGHT: The Voigt Domestic corner horn as explained in the company's 1930s brochure (left) and John Howes stands alongside one of his original Voigt Domestic corner horn speakers. He's also built his own...



TECHNICAL

The diagram below illustrates how the VOIGT Domestic Speaker has been developed from the straight horn type. Pointing the horn vertically upwards and dividing it by two planes through the axis has made possible the reduction of the mouth area and the length without affecting the response. The use of a lower reflector has helped further in this matter.

The air pressure produced on the back of the diaphragm at low frequencies is provided with an outlet near the floor which can only be reached by rising up over a partition. The shape and length of the air path to this outlet has been so adjusted that it serves as an efficient medium for conveying to the outside air energy available at the back of the diaphragm over the band of frequencies from the horn cut-off to well below 50 cycles.

The double curve of the distributing reflector is also indicated diagrammatically. This ensures that sounds concentrating near the axis are evenly distributed.

LIVING ROOM READY

Of course, this was far too big for home use, but Voigt followed up with his Domestic corner horn speaker. In essence, he took a quarter-section lengthways slice of the four-foot horn and stood it on end, pointing upwards. At the bottom, the driver fired onto a concrete reflector mounted at 45°, directing the sound upwards into the horn. At the top, a curved plaster reflector directed sound forward into the room. A bass chamber made efficient use of the drive unit's rear radiation.

> '"Once I had the plans, I thought I've got to do it!"'

Voigt's Domestic speaker was surely as far ahead of its time in the 1930s as the Quad electrostatic would be in the 1950s. But after the Second World War, Voigt found it almost impossible to build and sell expensive loudspeakers in Britain. Leaving his designs in the hands of Lowther, he emigrated to Canada in 1950, where he died in 1981.

John Howes, doyen of the vintage audio scene and the man behind the amazing Lowther-Voigt Museum (*www.lowthervoigtmuseum.org.uk*), has often told how he first heard the Voigt Domestic. Back around 1980, he'd become aware of the speaker, but had never seen one, until he visited a man in Exeter named John Wilkinson.

'I walked in and saw he had four Voigt Domestic corner horns, one in each corner, in a quasi-quadraphonic set-up', John explains. 'It just blew me away. I'd never heard anything like it. From then on, I had to have a Voigt. I got one, and then another one.' John became the collector *par excellence* and an acknowledged expert on Voigt's remarkable and innovative products.

CABINET MEETING

In 2010, he received a package from Bruce Edgar, the American horn guru who'd published the definitive interview (actually, as he explained, constructed from correspondence) in *Speaker Builder* magazine, and had been given access to Voigt's papers by his widow, Ida Voigt.

Now, along with Voigt's diaries and other papers, John had the original plans for the Domestic corner horn, never previously released. 'It was the match that lit the flame', John told me at the time. 'Once I had the plans, I thought, this is a project! I've got to do it!'.

John found a master cabinet maker, Les Bartlett, to build him an exact replica of Voigt's complex Domestic cabinet. And after a lot of hard work, John was ready to demonstrate his Howes Voigt Memory loudspeakers, the first ever dedicated stereo pair of Voigt corner horns.

More recently, John has been a supporter of the reborn Lowther company and its limited-edition revival of the Lowther Hegeman loudspeaker, originally designed in 1951 and now the flagship of the company's Heritage range.

LOOKING FORWARD

Only those with very deep pockets will be interested in the resurrected Hegemans, as a pair will cost around £100,000. But for the rest of us, there is something else to look forward to. John Howes is at last at work on his long-promised book, *The Lowther Voigt Legacy*. It promises to be a detailed and sumptuous revelation of all Voigt's creations and the Lowther products too. It's a treat in store.

Sound Off!

Send in your views to: Sound Off, Hi-Fi News, AVTech Media Ltd, Safeship Fulfilment Ltd, Unit A, Cullet Drive, Queenborough, ME11 5JS or email your views to: letters@hifinews.com – please use 'Sound Off' in your subject field

Correspondents express their own opinions, not those of *Hi-Fi News*. We reserve the right to edit letters for publication. Correspondents using e-mail are asked to give their full postal address (which won't be published). Letters seeking advice will be answered in print on our Sound Off pages, but due to time constraints we regret we're unable to answer questions on buying items of hi-fi or any other hi-fi queries by telephone, post or via e-mail.

COUNTER RESOLUTION

NEW STREAMER AND A SAMPLE RATE PUZZLE

I've been enjoying *Hi-Fi News* magazine for over 30 years now, and still very much look forward to it every month. I own an iFi Audio NEO Stream network-attached DAC [*HFN* Mar '23], an Anthem STR integrated amp, DALI Epicon 8 speakers [*HFN* Sep '12] and a REL 212/SE sub. Occasionally I also listen to CDs on an Esoteric X-05 CD/SACD player.

My question is whether moving to a HiFi Rose RS130 music library/streamer [*HFN* Oct '23] would improve the sound of my system? Buying one would also allow me to transfer my 1500 or so CDs onto the RS130's built-in SSD storage.

One problem is that I have been unable to get my Anthem amp to indicate higher than 96kHz resolution when playing from the NEO Stream (I have TIDAL and tracks can now be either MQA, FLAC or AAC). For example, tracks that I know to be 192kHz do show as this on the Anthem amp's display when I play them via a USB-connected home theatre PC (HTPC) running Windows. As do those tracks up to 384kHz.

I have tried outputting the signal from iFi Audio's NEO Stream via USB, coax and AES/EBU but 96kHz appears to be the highest possible sample rate I can obtain. I have contacted both Anthem in Canada and iFi Audio in the UK and both say there should be no issues in this regard. Both units are fully up to date when it comes to software.

Paresh Mardania, via email

Andrew Everard replies: As the NEO Stream is rated to 768kHz/DSD512 via its USB-A output, perhaps it's a USB handshaking or driver issue that's causing either a downsampling to 96kHz or simply a misidentification via the display. Either way, it's my understanding that the amp converts all incoming digital signals to 192kHz/32-bit. A workaround would be to use the NEO Stream's own DAC, and output in analogue to the Anthem STR, with the latter running in 'Direct' mode (the amp's 'DSP' mode also converts analogue ins to digital).

Will the RS130 improve the sound? That's something you should explore in a demo (along with the USB functionality) but, yes, you'll gain convenience thanks to that internal SSD storage. Or you could just add an SSD store to the NEO Stream via USB – as I have with this unit in one of my systems. I've had good results with WD mains-powered desktop drives. I think my last one cost me about £100 for 4TB. Or you could buy a powered housing for an SSD for about £20-25, and install the SSD of your choice.

ABOVE: The HiFi Rose RS130 streamer can house up to 4TB of internal SSD storage

Frankly speaking

READER TAKES ISSUE WITH ZAPPA 'VINYL RELEASE' REVIEW

I was disappointed to read Steve Sutherland's derogatory piece on the 50th Anniversary reissue of *Over-Nite Sensation* on 180g vinyl [*HFN* Feb '24]. He obviously didn't like it. Having treated myself to the 2LP version for Christmas, I couldn't quite see the point of, or agree with, his review.

Together with *Apostrophe* I've always thought that *Over-Nite Sensation* was one of the most accessible of The Mothers' records and, despite Steve's claim that the 'critics were not kind', the album was one of only four Frank Zappa records to achieve a gold disc in the US. I recommend that fellow readers take a listen to this fantastic album if at all interested in Zappa's work.

Andy Aldridge, via email

Steve Sutherland replies: Thanks for the letter Andy. I grew up with *Over-Nite-Sensation* and *Apostrophe* back in the '70s and was surprised by how badly they've aged. Lyrically they're puerile, which the critics did point out at the time. Having read a lot about Zappa, it seems he was less focused on grammar and sentence construction! Musically, on the other hand, although nowhere near as adventurous as some of his earlier stuff, the albums are exemplary, *Montana* – as I said in the piece – being the jewel in the (tarnished) crown.

WhitWorld

OUR HI-FI WORLD THROUGH THE EYES OF WHITWORTH

Big Bang theory

DOLBY, B&O AND THE STORY OF HX PRO NOISE REDUCTION

I read Barry Willis's column in the December 2023 issue and found myself completely in agreement with his views on the Compact Cassette, including both the poor quality of pre-recorded material and the under-rated Aiwa AD-F770!

However, I must pull Barry up on one part of his article, as the HX system had nothing to do with Harman Kardon. It was originally developed in-house by Dolby but rejected for use because it did not offer a sufficient improvement over a normal fixed-bias system.

It was actually Bang & Olufsen that took the basic concept of HX but improved upon it to create HX Pro. It then licensed the technology back to Dolby Laboratories after which it became a regular feature of both domestic and professional recorders.

Jacob Lewis, via email

Barry Willis replies: Jacob, thanks for tweaking my memory. Dolby and B&O were instrumental in the development of HX Pro, but my only experience was with Harman Kardon because I was working then for an HK dealer. To my ears audible improvements were slight – very much like the minuscule differences between some high-end DACs on the market today – but a big advantage was that tapes recorded with HX Pro did not require decoding.

ABOVE: Aiwa's AD-F770 from 1984 – one of the cassette era's most under-rated decks

Seeking an SACD solution

WHICH PLAYER WILL BEST COMPLEMENT MY QUAD SPEAKERS AND ELECTRONICS?

I am a classical music enthusiast and have been considering exploring recordings released on SACD. Currently I own a Quad Elite system of CD player, tuner, preamp and power amps [*HFN* Jan '11] and a pair of the company's 22L floorstanding speakers. Which 'add-on' SACD players would be a good match? I am happy to spend up to £2000.

Kristoffer Eilert, Denmark

Ken Kessler replies: It breaks my heart that fewer manufacturers support SACD despite the ever-increasing availability of worthy discs, but that's unlikely to change. As a result, the main SACD action is with brands such as McIntosh, Luxman, Esoteric, PS Audio, Marantz, dCS, Technics, *etc*, with models that exceed your preferred budget.

Earlier PlayStations played SACDs, and Sony still sells a 4K Blu-ray player (the £299 UBP-X800M2) that supports the format, but for dedicated SACD spinners beneath £2000 look to Denon and Arcam. I have used models from both with excellent results, so I would consider the Denon DCD-1700NE [*HFN* May '23] and the Arcam CDS50 [*HFN* Jun '20]. And my best ever buy? It's a secondhand Marantz DV8300 universal player.

ABOVE: Arcam's CDS50 not only plays CDs and SACDs but is network-capable too

JITTERBUG
USB Filter

Can a £39 insect make all your CD files sound better than Hi-Res?

Yes and no: Using the same equipment and a quality DAC, a 24/96 file (for example) will always sound better than a CD 16/44.1 file … but, even a single JitterBug will often allow a CD file to be more musical and more emotionally stimulating than a Hi-Res file without the benefit of a JitterBug.

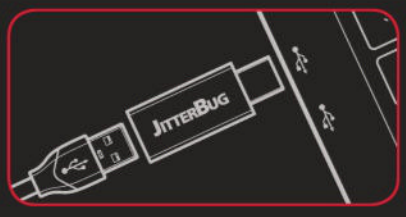
Noise is the problem. Real noise—the kind you can't hear directly. Most often, the word "noise" is used to describe tape hiss or a scratch on a record, but these sounds aren't noise; they are properly reproduced sounds that we wish weren't there.

Problem noise is essentially random, resonant or parasitic energy, which has no meaning. It can't be turned into discrete sounds, but it does compromise signal integrity and the performance of everything it touches.

JitterBug's dual-function line-conditioning circuitry greatly reduces the noise and ringing that plague *both* the data and power lines of USB ports, whether on a computer, streamer, home stereo or car audio front-panel USB input.

A single JitterBug is used in between devices (i.e., in series) as shown below. For an **additional "wow" experience,** try a second JitterBug into another USB port on the same device (such as a computer). Whether the second port is vacant, or is feeding a printer or charging a phone, JitterBug's noise-reduction ability is likely to surprise you. No, the printer won't be affected—only the audio!

While a JitterBug helps MP3s sound a lot more like music, high-sample-rate files have the most noise vulnerability. Try a JitterBug or two on all your equipment, but never more than two per USB bus. There is such a thing as too much of a good thing.



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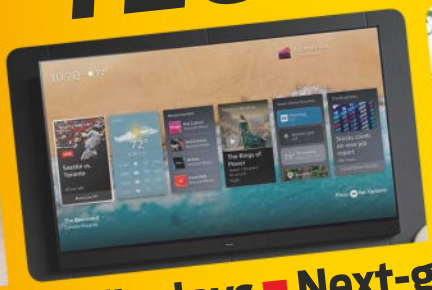

Transparent TV ■ Super-size displays ■ Next-gen soundbars ■ Mini LED

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Subwoofers leave me low

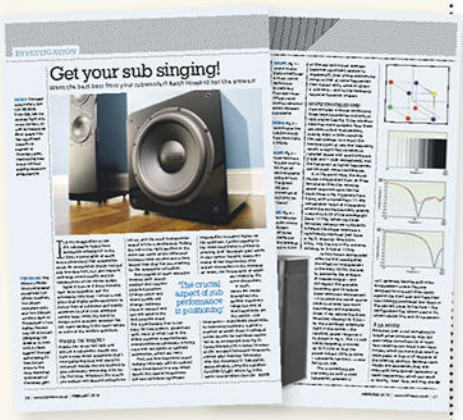
WHAT'S THE POINT OF ADDING A SUB TO A SYSTEM IF MAIN SPEAKERS ARE PERFORMING WELL?

I remember *HFN* publishing an overview of the principles behind subwoofers a few years ago [*HFN* Feb '19] with Ken Kessler's take on the Wilson Audio Lōkē [*HFN* Sep '22] being the last review I recall. I've owned and listened to numerous well-regarded and expensive subs in my time yet never found one that improved the sound of my main speakers or my listening experience.

I'm not talking about subs doing bass – that's a given. Rather, I'm talking about those mythical (to my ears, at least) improvements to the midrange, treble and soundstaging claimed by some. What's more, there are those who tell us that two subs – or more – are the only way to go.

What I've been trying to understand and hear for years is why, if I can never get one sub to improve my system, would two make a difference. I completely get the appeal of a system having two, or better still six, subwoofers in that they look cool standing behind or beside one's main speakers. That 'six-pack' shouts: 'I'm a real hi-fi guy with pots of money and solid muscles of steel'. But do subwoofers honestly improve the sound of already good speakers?

My experience is that rather than open up and free midrange and treble frequencies, subwoofers muddy the tone, naturalness, and 'ease' of the main speakers. That, and the need to constantly adjust them for loudness, crossover and even phase



ABOVE: Investigation into the science of subwoofer positioning in *HFN* Feb '19

in order to accommodate different albums and even individual tracks, is a headache. Subwoofers that allow these adjustments to be made on the fly via a remote make things easier, but even then it's all about constant fiddling rather than just enjoying the music. In short, subwoofers have always sounded 'in the way' to me. So just what is their appeal?

Bill McCardle, via email

Ken Kessler replies: My experiences of subwoofers are mixed, and only two remain in my possession: a MartinLogan Descent for 5.1 use and Rogers AB1 subwoofers for LS3/5As [see p138]. Disregarding home cinema usage, which is quite specifically dedicated to the 0.1 channel, and concentrating on pure audio, I find subwoofers to be intrusive much of the time. There is, however, no denying that they can relieve smaller satellites of the burden of bass and level, which is why there seems a never-ending quest to match subwoofers to LS3/5As.

Probably the most important criterion for an acceptable subwoofer is a dedicated model designed for a specific loudspeaker range, *eg*, the Lōkē for smaller Wilsons, the Descent for MartinLogans, Rogers AB3, *etc*. Another would be a model with enough adjustability to ensure a sonic match, such as the Lōkē or PMC twenty5.sub. I would add, too, that for loudspeakers for which there are no matching subs, look for similar woofer materials as this may help with sonic continuity.

ABOVE: Wilson Audio's active Lōkē sub includes a claimed 500W/4ohm amplifier

Four years ago, AudioQuest shook the hi-fi world with our first DragonFly DAC–Preamp–Headphone Amp—the rare audio product that brought more compelling sound to *all* music lovers, playing high-res files to MP3s on perfectionist systems and modest laptops.

Now, the new DragonFly Black and DragonFly Red exceed their predecessor in every way, delivering more beautiful music, boasting software upgradability, and providing compatibility with **Android** and **Apple iOS** mobile devices.

While **Black** offers more clarity, depth and category-defining value than ever before, the take-no-prisoners **Red** provides even more finesse, resolution, torque and more than enough power to drive even the most demanding headphones.

The word is out: DigitalAudioReview.net's John Darko calls DragonFly Red and Black "the finest examples of everyman hifi to ever grace these pages. Their value quotients explode the dial."

Let the joyful experience begin!

audioquest

Best amp with built-in phono stage?

WHAT'S THE SMART CHOICE WHEN IT COMES TO A SOLID-STATE INTEGRATED THAT WILL BRING VIM TO A VINYL-BASED SYSTEM?

First I would like to thank editor Paul Miller for his years of measuring gear, especially phono cartridges! Indeed, I believe he is now the only reviewer still testing pick-ups and, believe it or not, there are a great many of us who *do* read measurements! For example, you have no idea how many MC cartridge measurement charts I have looked at to find one that does not have a huge rising top end. There are enthusiasts on Internet audio forums who declare that measurements don't tell you how a component will sound, but they certainly help when it comes to putting together a short-list before you go shopping.

Anyway, to cut to the chase, can you recommend a one-box, solid-state integrated amp that has an outstanding built-in phono stage? As much as I would like the Mark Levinson N°585.5 given that the phono card has the widest signal-to-noise ratio I have found for both MM and MC cartridges, it is too rich-sounding for my tastes. On the other hand, the Accuphase E-4000 integrated amp with phono card has great specs but is too expensive for my budget.

I did a very deep dive into all the integrated amplifiers at around the £8000 price point that have a built-in phono stage and all had specs, specifically for the S/N ratio for MM and MC stages, that I found to be *worse* than those for the Marantz PM-11S3 amplifier [*HFN* Feb '13] I currently use! Several were on a par when it came to the MM stage but then far worse for the MC one.

Yes, I do indeed suffer from what has disparagingly been called 9th grade English syndrome in that my approach boils down to 'compare and contrast'. But that is the way I work.

The reason I am looking is that I want something with a bit more oomph than the PM-11S3 as I find its presentation a little too laid-back. At the moment, the rest of my system comprises MartinLogan Expression 13A loudspeakers [*HFN* Feb '18] plus a Pro-Ject RPM 10 Carbon turntable [*HFN* Jan '16] equipped with a high-output Sumiko Blackbird MC pick-up [*HFN* Nov '13].

By the way, I love tube amplifiers and think they sound great with electrostatic speakers. In fact, my first 'crush' was the MartinLogan CLS IIZ driven by an all-Audio Research valve system. However, I promised my wife no tubes as, God forbid, should I unexpectedly drop dead I do not want to leave her with a living room full of glowing-glass gear that she doesn't know what to do with.

Having said that, we were together at a recent hi-fi show where we heard a great presentation from VAC. At the end of the demo I told Kevin Hayes, the company's co-founder, that despite it being the best sound we'd heard at the event I was not willing to entertain tubes. When he asked why and I explained that it was because my wife would not know how to maintain them, Kevin did not miss a beat, powering down the system and explaining to my better half that 'it's as easy as changing a light bulb'.

ABOVE: Sumiko's Blackbird is a high-output MC cartridge with exposed boron cantilever

Thank you in advance for taking the time to consider my question. It goes without saying that I do not want a separate phono stage as this would mean another box and the need for yet another interconnect. The reason I want to be sure that I buy the correct model is that for me, this purchase will be (though I do not like the term) a 'last buy' amp.

Christopher Frank, via email

ABOVE: Pro-Ject's RPM 10 Carbon with 10CC Evo arm and an Ortofon Cadenza Black MC pick-up

Paul Miller replies: Glad to be of service, Christopher, though I should first caution against comparing manufacturer's specs (and those repeated in non-technical publications) because there's no guarantee that all brands are following the same protocols or standards. Quoted S/N figures for MM/MC phono stages are particularly open to interpretation! All our measurements adhere to IHF/DIN/IEC/AES, *etc*, guidelines and I can reliably compare a measurement taken now with one I recorded decades ago [see Vintage Review, p120].

Now to your question – find a replacement for your trusty PM-11S3 amplifier which, incidentally, made a mockery of its 100W spec. by delivering a huge 2x160W/8ohm and 2x260W/4ohm. For powerhouses there's little to beat the £5999 Rotel Michi X3 S2 [*HFN* Jan '24] and, though it offers MM only, is still sufficiently sensitive to handle your Blackbird MC. It's worthy of your audition. Otherwise there's the £5999 Yamaha A-S3200 [*HFN* May '21], capable of 2x120W/8ohm, 4x195W/4ohm and supporting both MM/MC pick-ups.

A protracted affair

THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF CARTRIDGE ALIGNMENT

Ken Kessler's 'Off The Leash' in the Feb '24 issue reminded me of my cartridge alignment trials and tribulations over the years. My first serious tonearm was an SME 3009. As readers will know, SME arms use a sliding base and I really didn't appreciate at the time how easy this made accurate cartridge alignment given what was to come!

I wanted to change the SME 3009 but couldn't afford to buy another SME arm, so I went over to Alphason. It was quite a shock: no sliding base and alignment accomplished by a 'push/pull and twist' technique – a method I never really took to.

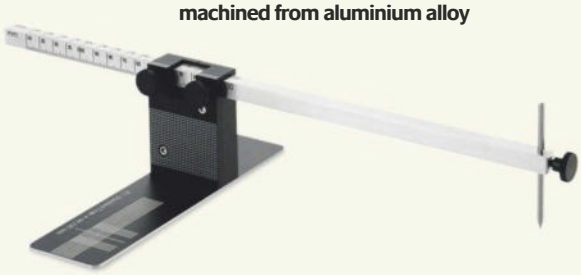
The last Alphason arm I owned was the HR-100S-MCS [*HFN* Dec '14], which I found to be a superb design. I then had the opportunity to part exchange the HR-100S-MCS for a silver-wired SME IV with a return to the sliding base. I now use an SME V.

I have never been confident of card and Perspex protractors, and as good as the SME alignment tool is, I prefer and use the Clearaudio IEC Alignment Gauge, which is similar to the Pro-Ject Align it PRO mentioned by Ken in his piece. If there was ever to have been an industry standard for tonearm mounting, SME's sliding base should have been it. Perhaps it all came down to patents!

Mike Bickley, via email

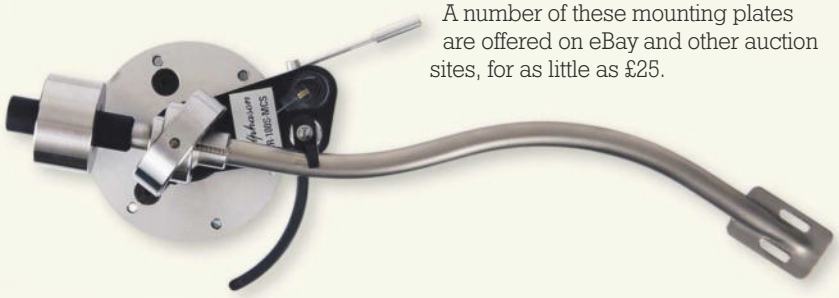
BELOW: The £135 Pro-Ject Align it PRO cartridge alignment tool adheres to the Baerwald geometry

BELOW: Reader Mike's favourite – the £285 Clearaudio IEC Alignment Gauge is machined from aluminium alloy



Ken Kessler replies: I haven't been able to ascertain if there was a patents issue with other makers using the SME sliding base, but I have found a number of arms supplied with bases that fit precisely the same cut-out and four-screw pattern and thus afford the same sliding operation. With the Graham Phantom's SME-shaped base, the plate itself slides a few millimetres fore and aft, rather than the arm pillar in its collar. The late, lamented Infinity Black Widow's SME-style baseplate allowed the arm to slide exactly as per an SME arm, and I am sure there are other arms which provided this style of mount.

Perhaps of more interest to Mr Bickley are aftermarket SME-type base plates that accept most arms with cylindrical pillars, *eg*, those from Linn, Rega and others. I am using just such a device with the Mørch DP-8 I am about to install on one of my turntables. A number of these mounting plates are offered on eBay and other auction sites, for as little as £25.



ABOVE: The Alphason HR-100S-MCS with its S-shaped titanium armtube arrived in 1983, the 'MCS' moniker indicating that the internal wiring was van den Hul mono-crystal silver

In A World Full of Vinyl Cleaning Options, There's Only One Inescapable Conclusion.

For more than 50 years, the Spin-Clean Record Washer system has set the standard when it comes to delivering the best-value record cleaning solution. Spin-Clean removes dust, dirt, film, grease and fingerprints, while cleaning both sides of the record at the same time. And the Spin-Clean design is simplicity itself – there are no batteries or AC required.

The Spin-Clean fluid is also biodegradable. There are no harmful agents, alkalines, or phosphates, and it's totally alcohol-free. All of which is why the Spin-Clean Record Washer system has been acclaimed by both audiophiles and first-time users alike and cited by independent reviewers as the most effective vinyl cleaning option for the money. Given the investment in your record collection, isn't it time you take Spin-Clean "for a spin"?

stereophile RECOMMENDED COMPONENT 2022

For more information about the Spin-Clean record washer system, go to **spinclean.com**.

2023 the absolute sound EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

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FRANCO SERBLIN AT OXFORD AUDIO

After leaving Sonus Faber, founder Gianfranco Serblin went on to develop a more traditional range of striking high-end speakers. Featuring the classic "Serblin" sound, each model has exquisite build, use of only the finest components, complex cabinets and handmade in Italy.

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DPA DSP-200S/DPA-200S

Rising phoenix-like from the ashes of Deltec Precision Audio in 1992, the 'continuity brand' DPA retained designer Robert Watts' flair for innovation. How does it fare today? Review: **Tim Jarman** Lab: **Paul Miller**

The story of DPA is not uncommon among small and specialised hi-fi manufacturers. Arriving in 1992, it actually represented the second iteration of a company co-founded by Robert Watts (who has since gone on to be digital design consultant at Chord Electronics). And while Deltec Precision Audio, which debuted in 1984 with its CTA80 preamplifier, had ultimately shut up shop in the early '90s, the ideas behind its original models clearly had some merit – it was soon back with Watts onboard, albeit under a slightly different name.

One of the first products released was a new pre/power system. Composed of the DSP-200S preamplifier and the buyer's choice of one or two DPA-200S power amplifiers (a single DPA-200S would give 2x50W, while two running in bridge mode would give a total of 200W, hence the '200' in the name), it evolved from the previously released '50' models of Deltec but represented an improvement in a number of ways. Most importantly it was cheaper despite being no less powerful – the DSP-200S cost £450 and the DPA-200Ss were £750 each. They were also smaller, neater and better finished, and the sound of the combination had been re-voiced to be less 'stark' – some had felt the DPA-50S had been too dry and lacking in bass weight.

ABOVE: The dark grey crackle finish of DPA's midi-sized amps replaced the more rounded appearance and gloss paint of the earlier Deltec-branded separates

The most interesting technical change was that the four core loudspeaker cables with sensing wires brought out to the loudspeaker terminals of the DPA-50S (essentially a re-working of Trio's 'Sigma Drive' system from about a decade previously) were dispensed with in favour of a more conventional arrangement where the feedback loop was completed inside the amplifier's cabinet. This meant that special Deltec loudspeaker cables were no longer necessary and the chances of damaging the amplifier through incorrect connections were greatly reduced. The downside to this economising was that there was no longer a phono stage inside the preamplifier. For those with LP-based systems, the matching DSP-200D phono stage was made available, although the interest in digital sources at the time meant that few were made.

SHORT AND SWEET

The DPA-200S power amplifier included in its design some unusual technical features. A key aim was the reduction of susceptibility to RF interference, and for this reason miniature surface-mounted

LEFT: The hard coating is resilient but the gold-coloured silk-screen printing is more prone to wear. The designer, Robert Watts, went on to develop the 'Pulse array' DAC technology as Chord Electronics' digital design consultant

LEFT: The volume control is passive but logic switching is used for the inputs and also balance adjustment via a bank of internal resistors. Flush green LEDs indicate power on and chosen input

(SMD) components were used wherever possible to keep signal path lengths short. This was a largely unexplored technique in consumer audio at the time, outside certain specialised areas such as portable CD players. One of the problems was that many of the critical parts for high-quality amplification (such as high-grade film capacitors and large wattage resistors) were not obtainable in surface-mounted form. DPA's designers got around these problems by using conventional leaded capacitors in certain key positions, and connecting a number of small resistors together to make one larger one where a lot of power had to be dissipated. Effective screening was also pursued through the use of enveloping metal cabinets made from heavy-gauge material. This was a definite improvement over the plastic and chipboard used by some of DPA's rivals.

'Signal path lengths are kept as short as possible'

Another highlight was the use of Deltec's hybrid operational amplifier, the DH-OA32 [see picture, p123], as the gain and feedback stabilisation element in each channel. This was built on a highly stable ceramic substrate where the track work and the resistors were formed using special conductive paints, a technique known as the 'thick film' method. The other SMD-type components were then soldered in place to complete the module. Such engineering was already common in TV sets and video recorders, but its use in quality audio was novel (although not completely new – as the DSP unit inside Technics' mid-1980s SL-P3 CD player [*HFN* Sep '22] illustrated).

POWER PUSHER

The rest of the amplifier followed the pattern set by the DPA-50S. It used four output transistors per channel in a DC-coupled class A/B2 circuit. Two mains transformers were fitted, one of which fed the positive side of the power supply and the other the negative. These were shared by both channels.

The DSP-200S preamp was a simpler affair, although it was still largely constructed from SMD components. All five inputs had the same sensitivity and gain, the maximum being around +12.5dB at the full volume setting. The tape loop was buffered at the output, showing that the designers took this feature seriously. Active components in the DSP-200S were conventional operational amplifier chips rather than Deltec's hybrid modules, a compromise made necessary to meet the target price. Signal routing was performed electronically, the only moving contacts in the signal path being those inside the volume control.

LOOKING GOOD

This pre/power's styling is something of a success. Despite the simple construction, the units appear discreetly expensive and clearly the possession of a serious listener. Everyday operation could have been made easier in a number of ways, however: there is no 'standby' mode on either model, and mains switches on both are small and hidden away at the back. DPA recommended that they be left switched on all the time, but to do this now with a 30-year-old amplifier with minimal internal fusing strikes me as foolhardy.

The source selector of the DSP-200S reverts to its CD input at switch on; changing this involves a small button that skips through all five inputs in one direction only. Furthermore, while the volume control – a Japanese ALPS 'Blue' type – is as beautifully silky as these always are, the sensitivity of the CD input is excessive for ⟳

LEFT: The DSP-200S and DPA-200S were reviewed by *HFN* editor PM as part of a group test in *Hi-Fi Choice* Nov '93. Other models were from Quad, Adcom, Alchemist, NAD and Arcam

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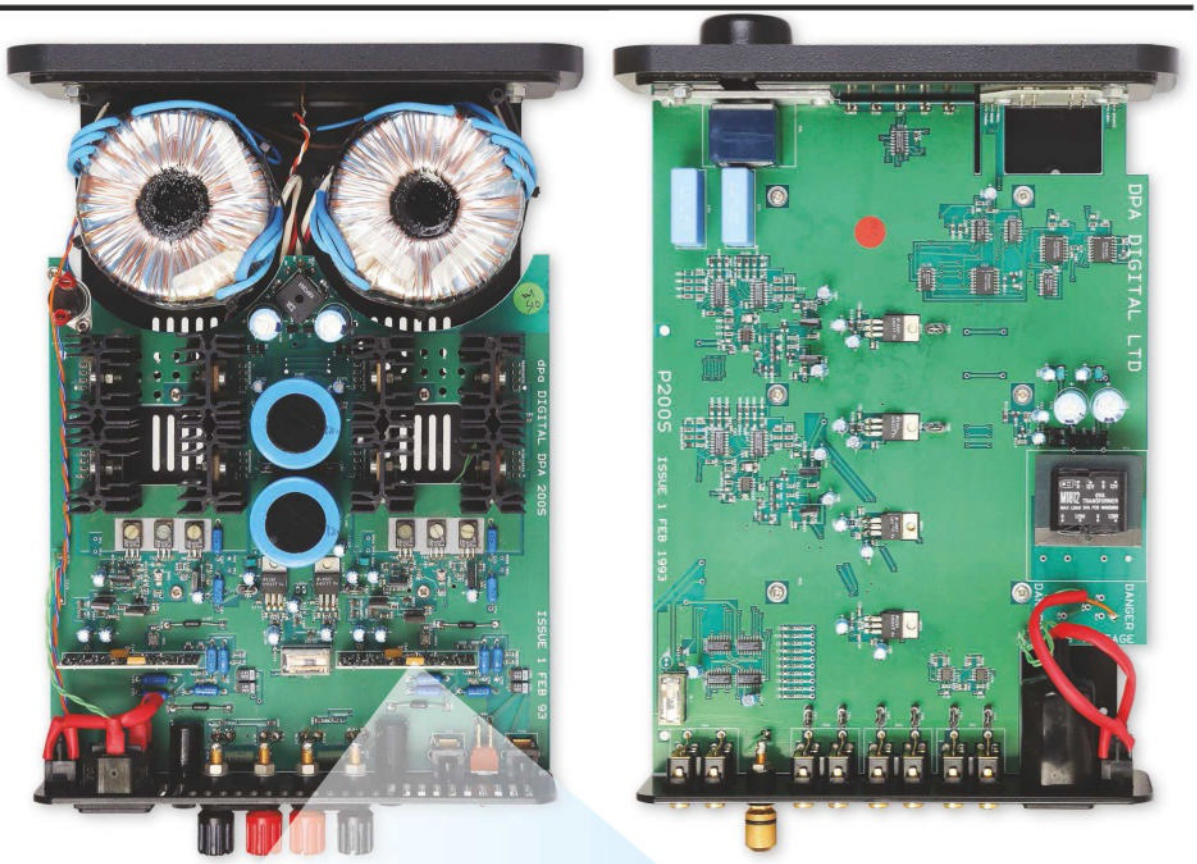


RIGHT: The DPA-200S's two transformers [top] are contra-connected into a single stereo PSU [centre]. The fully discrete DH-OA32 hybrid op-amps were a feature of all Deltec/DPA amplifiers of note [see inset picture]

a standard 2V RMS machine, making obtaining a low-level output for quiet listening difficult.

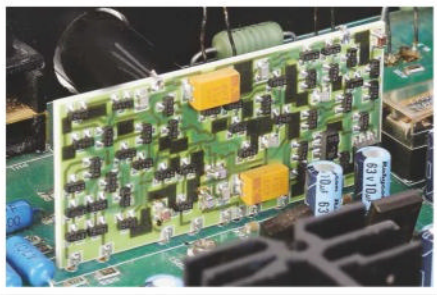
Something that I did appreciate was the care that had clearly been taken in ensuring that the units could be switched on and off in any order without generating ear-splitting crackles and howls through the loudspeakers. Any regular user of specialist equipment will know that this is not always the case. The well-engineered tape loop is another welcome addition.

TIM LISTENS

My first impressions of DPA's system were that despite the attempt to add extra prominence to the bottom end, the sound still has a dry character with a clear midrange lift. It is smooth without being excessively rich, and revealing without being obviously sharp. Neither the deep bass nor the high treble are especially extended but what is there is well ordered over a wide range of listening levels.

The DPA-200S can produce the sort of listening experiences one would expect from a 50W model. The amplifier's internal power supply seems to be the limiting factor, as it was the bottom end that got slightly muddied first as the limit was approached, but for general listening there is more than enough grunt available here. The combination's most impressive strength could be found at the opposite end of the output scale, though. There was essentially no noise audible through the loudspeakers at any setting of the volume control, which is quite a feat for a pairing of this layout. In fact, the only thing that broke the silence in my listening room between pieces was a buzz from the mains transformers in our DPA-200S.

'The sound is smooth without being overly rich'



ABOVE: Dated February 1993, the first issue PCB of the DSP-200S shows LM317/337 PSU regulators [centre], 74HC4051 multiplexers for input and balance switching [far left] plus NE5534 audio op-amps [top left]

Playing Tanita Tikaram's 'For All These Years' [*Ancient Heart*; WEA 2438772] revealed lots of space and a wonderful sense of breathy presence in the vocals, but this was set against a longing that the redesign had been still more generous with the bass. Subjectively the sound is still a bit cold, even when using material and loudspeakers which are not. System matching is therefore a matter that will require care with these amps.

A separates system brings the chance to further investigate tonal colourations like this and the results were interesting. The lean bass originates in the DPA-200S unit, whereas the DSP-200S contributes a subtle but clearly identifiable veiling of the upper treble by contrast with the units which I substituted into the system – an Aurex SC-M15 and SY-C15 [*HFN* Apr '16] used in passive mode. Simple acoustic material is not necessarily impeded by these traits; instead it lends the sound a simple clarity which can be really beguiling.

DUTCH COURAGE

Orchestral set-pieces showed another side of DPA's compact duo. My work of choice was Beethoven's 7th symphony, performed by the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam [Philips 420 540-2]. The soundstage was impressively expansive and the clarity around solo instruments almost forensic, but the shortfall in absolute bass weight, and an initially not obvious but eventually apparent dulling of the bite of the strings, meant I couldn't escape the impression that something was missing. That something was the excitement and dynamics of real music which makes a live performance (or a truly excellent system at home) such a joy to listen to.

Raising the volume to a realistic level (something that the DPA-200S amp handled without fuss) narrowed the gap

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ABOVE: The DSP-200S [top] has four line inputs (phono was an option), a tape loop and two preamp outs while the DPA-200S [bottom] has inputs on RCAs and speaker outputs on 4mm binding posts. A toggle switched the amp into bridged mono mode

but it was never quite a 'close your eyes and be there' sort of sound. Substituting the preamplifier again and pushing the loudspeakers further into the corners of the room brought about a very worthwhile improvement; perhaps what the DPA-200S needs is a nice little passive preamp and a pair of something big and ported.

DPA's technologies succeed to a great extent in doing what the designers intended. The DPA-200S in particular is an excellent technical amplifier. Musically, however, the sound of this pre/power pairing is something of an acquired taste.

BUYING SECONDHAND

The use of miniature surface-mount components makes any repair to the DPA-200S far more complicated that it is with a conventionally constructed amplifier. Not only are the parts tiny, they are also not all marked with type numbers so without a circuit diagram (something which is not in general circulation) it is very difficult to know what everything is and what to replace it with. Any example which is not demonstrably in perfect working order should therefore be treated with extreme suspicion – insist on a proper audition first.

It has been noted that the internal heatsinks are rather small for the task at hand and therefore long periods of running at high power levels are not recommended. For the same reason a bridged system should still be used with a degree of restraint. The situation with the DSP-200S is a little better. As well as being less densely laid out, it operates at lower power levels and is greatly less likely to suffer from catastrophic failure.

ABOVE: 30 years ago the turnover of new products was considerably faster than today – group tests of up to 25 products were offered monthly!

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

These cute and compact DPA amplifiers are technically clever and interestingly different in both interior design and outward construction, so represent a break from the pre/power norm. Careful system building will be the route to listening enjoyment, however, and whatever you do you must buy and operate the DSP-200S and DPA-200S with care, because most repairs will not be straightforward!

Sound Quality: 75%

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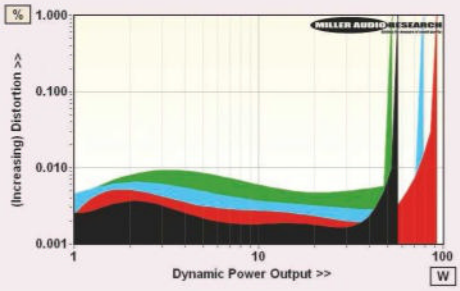
LAB REPORT

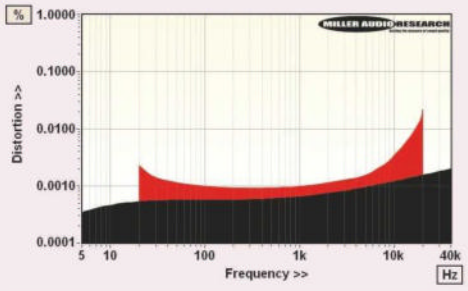
DPA DSP-200S/DPA-200S *(Vintage)*

These amplifiers remain as innovative and high-performing as they were over 30 years ago when I first tested them [*HFC 124*, Nov '93]. Both the pre and power amps are equipped with 'Compound-Class A' output stages driven via surface-mount NE5534s in the case of the DSP-200S and via DPA's own DH-OA32 op-amps [see p123] and power transistors in the matching power amp. Feedback is also extended right to the output terminals of both amps – hence the vanishingly low 0.08-0.45ohm (pre) and 0.003-0.05ohm (power) output impedances (all re. 20Hz-20kHz). While the preamp will also make an excellent headphone amplifier and the power amp offers a massive damping factor, the latter's ability to drive low sensitivity speakers is limited by its 2x51W/8ohm, and 2x80W/4ohm output, increasing marginally to 56W, 93W, 79W and 54W into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads, respectively, under dynamic conditions [see Graph 1]. Unusually, the power amp is phase-inverting, so do experiment with those red and black speaker leads.

Distortion [see Graph 2] is very low at 0.0005-0.0015% (preamp, 0dBV) and 0.0015-0.02% (power amp, 10W), and also very uniform with output as it holds to ~0.0015%/1kHz from 1W to 45W/8ohm. The responses follow the decrease in feedback/increase in output impedance at higher frequencies, gently rolling away to –0.25dB/20kHz and –4.78dB/100kHz in the preamp and –0.4dB/20kHz and –6.0dB/100kHz in the power amp. Noise is very low indeed, and the A-wtd S/N ratios correspondingly wide at 98.4dB and 96.0dB (re. 0dBV and 0dBW, respectively). Finally, as the DPA-200S is a dual-mono design, stereo separation is a hearty >85dB (20Hz-20kHz). **PM**



ABOVE: Dynamic power output vs. distortion up to 1% THD into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (cyan) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max current is 7.35A



ABOVE: Pre/power distortion vs. frequency at 0dBV (DSP-200S, black) and 10W/8ohm (DPA-200S, red)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	51W / 80W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	56W / 93W / 79W / 54W
Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz, pre/power)	0.08-0.45ohm / 0.003-0.05ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz–100kHz, pre/power)	–0.2 to –4.7dB/+0.0 to –6.0dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBV/0dBW)	230mV (pre) / 159mV (power)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	98.4dB (pre) / 96.0dB (power)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 0dBV/10W)	0.0005-0.0015%/0.00095-0.02%
Power consumption (idle/rated o/p)	19W/179W (4W, preamp)
Dimensions (WHD, Pre/Power)	220x83x330/220x83x315mm

Micros can be mega

Miniature components claiming high-end performance... **Martin Colloms** hears French company Micromega's Microdrive, Variodac and Microamp

Hi-Fi News Jul 1993

Each month *HFN* will bring you an article from our vast archive of features and reviews from yesteryear

Sitting in a neat stack on the desk in front of me as I write, the subjects of this review remind me of those pretty Toshiba Aurex units of yesteryear [*HFN* Apr '16]. There are three Micromega components in all: the Microdrive CD transport (an improbably small device, this); the Variodac, comprising a Bitstream digital-to-analogue converter with remote power volume control and an additional line input; and finally, the Microamp, a neat-looking stereo power amplifier block.

HOT STUFF

Each unit measures just 220mm wide by 60mm high, but the power amp is deeper than the other two units at 205mm front-to-back. It is rated at 25W per channel into 8ohm, and is claimed to be highly tolerant of loading, including electrostatic speakers.

Warnings explain that the heatsink runs hot, at typically some 50°C when idling, and even hotter under heavy drive. This is allowed for in the EC standards for this configuration, though lower temperatures are demanded for front and top covers. Such is the overall heat output of the amp that it must remain free-standing, as it will quickly overheat if stacked.

ABOVE: From top to bottom – the Microdrive, Variodac and Microamp, which as a system cost £2100 on launch

CABLE TALK

Staying with the power amp, it has plain 4mm sockets for loudspeaker cable connections while mains input is via an IEC detachable cable. The power switch is on the rear panel and signal input is via gold-plated phono plugs. Access to all of these is tight, the whole group crowded in between the heatsink fins.

The Variodac contains the same Bitstream DAC as Micromega's £349 Microdac, but also includes a simple, remote-controlled line preamp. This only has one external analogue input. The volume control has a wide 99-step range and operates both smoothly and progressively. Optical and coaxial digital inputs are allowed with automatic switching to whichever is active, so CD could be on the preferred coaxial connection and DAT or DCC on the optical one.

Mains input is via a detachable IEC cord and the unit is intended to remain permanently warmed up as power consumption is said to be only 7W. If unused for long periods then the power should, however,

be disconnected from the Variodac. Input selection and volume control is possible from the front panel while the remote control handset provided also carries the main CD and transport commands selection. Meanwhile, special double key codes control input selection and phase invert, and these must be learned.

TOP MODEL

A simple remote control is also included with the Microdrive, although this lacks the volume function. Both remotes have a ten-key pad plus search, track skip and repeat. The Microdrive is distinguished not only by its very small size but also by its dual display and control panels. A top loader with a lift-up (non-motorised) lid in heavy black acrylic, the unit has simple controls and a display on both the top surface and the front. The upward-facing display facilitates manual use, and then shuts down automatically while the second, front-facing display remains active for remote control operation.

Both coaxial (phono type) and optical data outputs are provided and this unit has an electronic on/off switch that enables a standby mode. When not in use for long periods, the IEC power cord should be disconnected from the unit.

The Variodac costs a relatively modest £599 and if remote control is not required there is also the Microdac alternative at £349. The Microdrive costs £799, not far from the Meridian 200 unit. Also planned is a remote-controlled Microtuner, which is expected to sell at £599.

A universal remote for the whole system is under design and will be included in the tuner package.

TECHNOLOGY

The Microdrive uses Philips' steel-framed CDM-9 transport equipped with its standard DC motor. The main board is of Micromega design and all the servo drivers have their own regulated supplies and are differential amplifiers, rejecting both ground and supply line noise. The Philips 3523 ADIC is used for the digital output drive, operating in local crystal mode to minimise transport jitter seen at the output interface. A modest mechanical suppression system isolates the transport from the worst effects of vibration while disc clamping is achieved via a small well-centred brass weight bearing down on a neoprene 'o' ring.

> 'The main DAC is the SAA7321 from Philips'

In the Variodac, a version of the Microdac, there is a small custom microprocessor to control the volume control and input-switching functions, between the analogue input and the internal DAC. Volume control is by means of specially selected DAC-controlled VCAs (voltage-gain controlled amplifiers) while the main DAC is a Philips SAA7321, the original one-chip (non-differential) Bitstream type (1-bit, 256x oversampled).

UNUSUAL CIRCUIT

Data acquisition is by the popular low-jitter Crystal ADIC. Again great care has been taken when it comes to the power supplies employed here, with extensive local regulation, and the output ICs chosen for both their low output impedance and wide bandwidth.

ABOVE: Original pages from the Jul '93 issue of *HFN* which saw Martin Colloms test Micromega's Microdrive, Variodac and Microamp components to see how they'd stack up

BELOW: The Variodac (left) is a converter with a preamp function and features a Bitstream DAC from Philips. The Microdrive (right) is a top-loading transport that uses a Philips CDM-9 mechanism

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Inside the cigar-box sized Microamp is an amplifier of some sophistication. The output is direct-coupled complementary MOSFET design operating in an enriched Class A/B mode while a DC servo allows for a capacitorless signal path from input to output. The circuit is unusual in that the all-discrete circuitry is arranged as a current feedback amplifier of very wide bandwidth; the input impedance is defined by an input resistor of 20kohm, while ICs monitor temperature and DC offset, warning of impending danger. Electronic protection is not provided, but instead there are a number of quick-blow fuses, most of them located on the inside. I would not recommend making connections to this amplifier while the power is on.

REFERENCE GROUP

For this report two grades of speaker were used, namely the Epos ES-11 and the Spendor SP2-2, the latter making the best of the amplifier's output. Yes, it did work well with the Quad Electrostatic, but could not play loudly enough to justify its use. Reference electronics included Micromega's own Duo BS decoder, the Duo and Meridian 200 transports and the Musical Fidelity A1000 integrated amplifier.

The Microdrive is not particularly well isolated and on my floor it would mistrack occasionally when someone walked out of the room. A dedicated turntable table helped matters here and also improved the sound. Its siting needs some consideration. The Variodac was even-tempered and its functions certainly operated well.

Viewed as a system, the review group totals £2100 plus loudspeakers and cables, and it received a mixed reception. On the positive side, it coped with all genres of music with an easy grace, never sounding aggressive or obtrusive. Tonal balances were consistently neutral, and the sound was also free from hardness and had no obvious coloration or distortion – for example, treble roughness or grain. These are all important points.

Conversely, while the overall standard was above average, in context it did not greatly draw the listener's attention. Certainly competent as regards factors such as clarity, stage depth and focus, it was rated just average for dynamics and rhythm. In this price group, Micromega's own Duo BS clearly demonstrated just how vital and communicative this technology can sound, effortlessly showing its paces in conjunction with the Musical Fidelity A1000 integrated amplifier.

> 'It had an easy grace with all kinds of music'

The answer was to split up the Micro system and substitute for each component in turn. First, the Microdrive was replaced by the Meridian 200. The latter's high rating was confirmed immediately and showed the Microdrive to be the dominant restraining factor in the system sound. With the '200 in its place the soundstage was substantially clearer, deeper, wider and better focused. There was an uplift in dynamics while both bass timing and attack were improved, and this comparison showed that the Microdrive had not yet reached the required standard.

ABOVE: The Microdrive (top) has a lift-up, non-motorised lid in heavy black acrylic. The controls are intuitive and the unit has a display on both its top surface and fascia

FINE FARE

Next, the Duo BS was connected to the Variodac analogue input, with the Meridian 200 transport. Here, the Variodac gave a good account of itself and while the Duo was clearly better, on my listening test scoring system the 'DAC' rating for the Variodac was fine. In practice, its on-board volume control will give it an additional advantage. The Variodac has a performance in the 'good' to 'very good' range for stereo soundstage, clarity, tonality and also has above average dynamics and rhythm. Equally important was the

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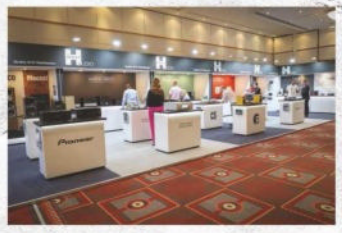

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approval gained for the analogue line amplifier section, since those fine results were achieved with this being present in the replay chain.

As for the Microamp, this was found to be respectable if not particularly outstanding. Certainly, it did not compromise the Micro system when viewed as a whole, while the Variodac itself was good enough to show some limitations in the power amplifier. The overall rating was 'fairly good' on my scaling. Nothing stuck out, the whole was well balanced in all the major parameters and it was easy on the ears. Stereo depth was average while both stage width and focus were very good.

As for dynamics, these were classed as good. In the bass there was some loss of extension, weight and slam and while it played tunes well in the bass, more grip was needed to exploit the kind of low end that the Micromega Duo BS can provide.

All in all, this Micromega system works when considered in the overall context of good quality miniature remote-controlled components. As far as the enthusiast, 'cherry picking' from the range will provide the best results. Valued more for its looks than its sound quality, the Microdrive deserves some further technical research.

A WINNER

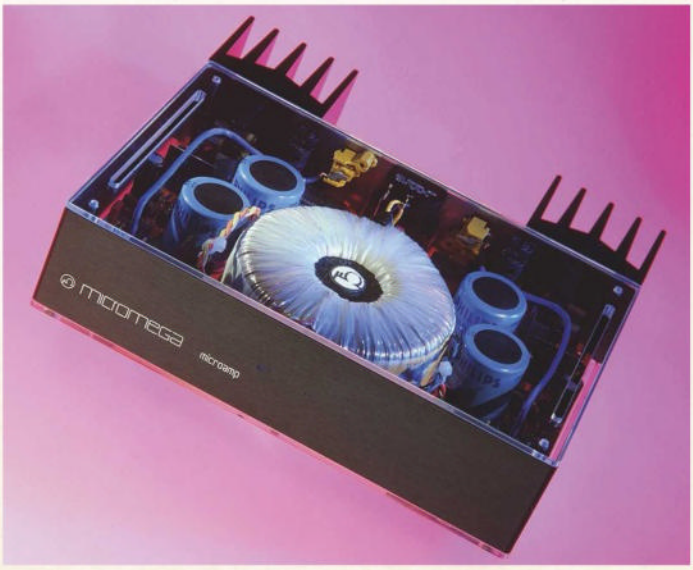
The Microamp is a very neat, hot little amplifier, worth considering in this system context if the output power is sufficient for your needs. In fact, on test it met its specification in this area with a cruising power of some 30W into 8ohm and 50W into 4ohm. Peak current delivery was fine for the output level, measuring ±12A. Driven flat out into 4ohm (both channels), output was held at 13.1dBW even at 20Hz, representing a true power of 2x40W. Power bandwidth was fine and output impedance was flat at 0.1ohm over a wide freq. range.

However, in my opinion the most successful unit in the series is the Variodac. I regard the combination of a fine DAC with a very competent if simple remote-controlled line preamp to be a winner. It represents a powerful and ergonomic upgrade for many CD players with digital outputs and also benefits from a good transport in more exacting applications. We'll keep an eye on further developments in this range!

'The most successful unit here is the Variodac'

ABOVE: Inside the Variodac, a small custom microprocessor controls both volume and the input-switching functions while the main DAC is a Philips SAA7321

BELOW: Interior of the Microamp shows how most of the space is taken up by the transformer. Note the hefty heatsinks to the rear – this power amp runs hot!



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SOUND THE HORN
John Crabbe on the theory and practice of horn loudspeakers.

IT'S IN THE MIC
Tony Faulkner on what makes recordings sound good or bad.

A BIG-HEARTED MONITOR
Tannoy's D700 gets an in-depth review from Martin Colloms.

SHARING THE PROCEEDS
The Proceed PDT3 transport and PDP3 DAC promise Levinson performance at lower cost. Martin Colloms reports.

DOUBLE DAC
Paul Miller tests Harman Kardon's unusual HD7625 CD player, using two converters staggered in time.

MUSICAL FIDELITY TUBALOG
Ken Kessler reviews a DAC that boasts valves in the output.

YBA CD2
Ken Kessler on the French player designed by Yves Bernard Andre.

CHANGE OF NAIMS
Martin Colloms assesses the Naim SBL speaker.

TWO LUXURY TUNERS
Trevor Butler tests tuners with a pedigree, Arcam's new Delta 280 and the Sansui TU-X711.

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12. MISCELLANEOUS

HEXMAT Yellow Bird Phono Record Isolator Mat, £70 plus p&p (£124.99 new). Six months old. Reason for selling is that I have upgraded to the Eclipse. Email: michael.bickley@hotmail.co.uk

HI-FI News, 88 copies from Sept 1965 to July 1973, almost complete, plus eight assorted copies between Jan 1974 and Nov 1991. All shelved vertically and from a smoke-free house. £350. Tel: 01590 670813

QUAD 33 preamp, 303 FM in teak case. Setup books, all cables, in very good condition, sold as seen. £1500. Garrard 401, teak plinth, SME 3009 arm, Shure V15 cartridge, setup books, LP. Very good condition, sold as seen. Total together £2899. Tel: 01803 863162

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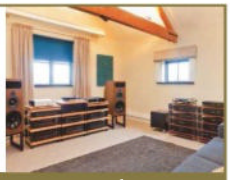

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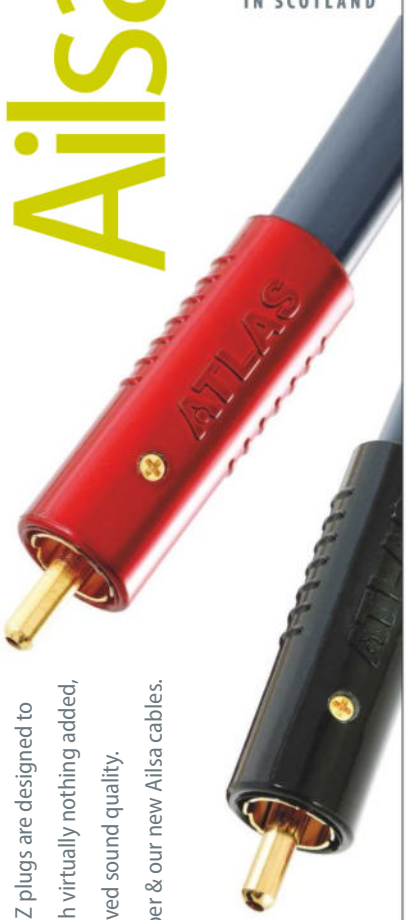

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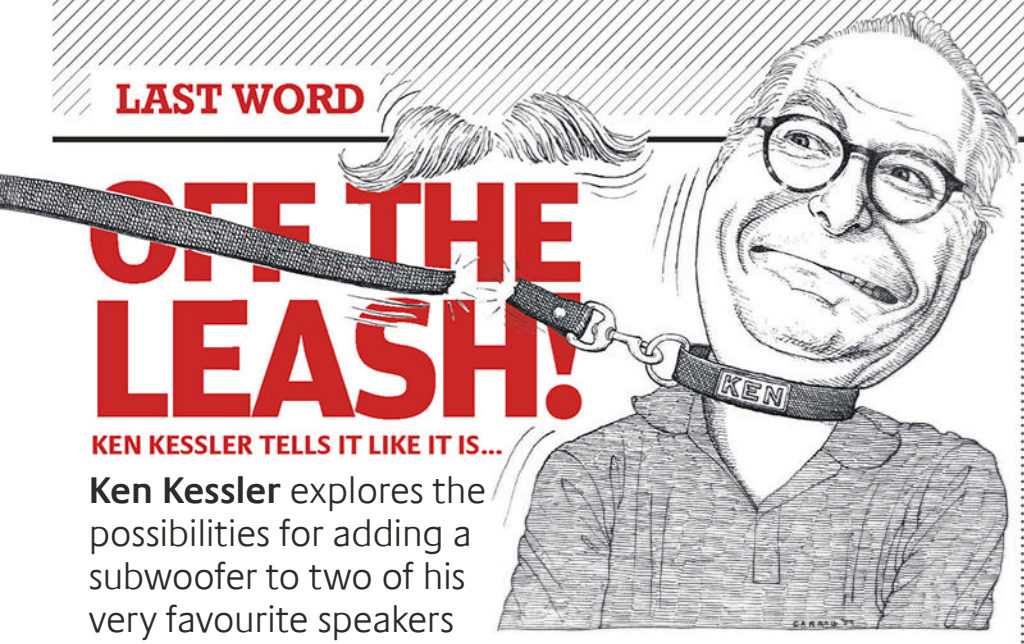

KEN KESSLER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS...

Ken Kessler explores the possibilities for adding a subwoofer to two of his very favourite speakers

Considering the plethora of equipment I've amassed over the years, I've realised that there's only one subwoofer in my home, and that's rarely used as it drives my wife crazy. The sub is in the home cinema so I can undertake reviewing of 5.1 SACDs – five MartinLogan speakers and a Descent sub – but the ML Summits deliver so much bass anyway that I understand Mrs K's objections: the bass ripples through the whole building.

But I'm torn between wanting one for use with LS3/5As, Quad ESL57s and other bass-light speakers, while dealing with the usual objections about mismatches.

ASKING THE EXPERTS

Not least I'm intrigued because I got a kick out of the Rogers AB3a [*HFN* Oct '21] dedicated to the LS3/5A, and equally the Wilson Audio Lōkē [*HFN* Sep '22] which worked beautifully with both the Quads and my LS3/5As. I'm toying with the notion of buying a sub, but size and space are issues. The Lōkē is manageable, its enclosure housing a 10in bass driver, but it's way out of my price range. Less easy to house is Wilson's next model up, the Submerge with its 12in woofer and double the Lōkē's power, to a kilowatt.

Even more tempting are the small cubes on the market, while Rogers' AB3a is utterly unobtrusive because it replaces the stands needed for LS3/5As or other small monitors like Tannoy Autograph Minis. With price and size in mind, I asked two LS3/5A experts what settings they'd require in a 'universal' subwoofer, one with sufficient adjustments for crossover, slope and level.

For Rogers' Andy Whittle, who has designed more than one dedicated subwoofer for the LS3/5A, he's confident that what defines the Rogers AB3a sub also spells out what's required from a third-party model, *eg*, 'a 100Hz crossover and 12dB/octave slope'. That rang a bell, the settings used when I was reviewing both the AB3a and the Lōkē, my only area of self-doubt being the level matching which has to be tuned by ear and governed by personal bias.

Falcon Acoustics' Jerry Bloomfield agrees with Andy about the 12dB roll-off but goes further with a recommendation I was delighted to learn. 'We have used the [EISA Award-winning] SVS SB-3000 with superb results.' He suggests starting with a 50Hz crossover point 'for seamless integration, 180° phase, and a 12dB roll-off. It's available in the UK: Karma AV are the importers, it's not silly money, it has a smartphone-friendly app which works brilliantly, and it gives excellent, well-integrated results'.

> 'The bass just ripples through the building'

With a price of around £1200, I couldn't have been more relieved. Sadly, though, the one person I'd trust to proffer the same information for matching a subwoofer to Quad ESL57s is no longer with us: Tim de Paravicini of EAR Yoshino. What many have forgotten is that among Tim's wilder creations was a pair of Quads which he had gutted of nearly all the electronics for direct-coupling to his amps.

I heard them at a show, and the sound was remarkable – but there is always a sense of foreboding when I hear about direct-coupling and by-passing the original electronics. For whatever reason, I imagined Futterman OTL amplifiers and Dayton-Wright plasma speakers and Hill Plasmatronics and high-voltage anode caps and exploding amplifiers which nearly cost me an eye, and a host of other audio creations with a built-in sense of danger.

TRULY TRANSPARENT

Tim reassured me that his modded Quads were perfectly safe, but I still recall him prodding the insides of my Revox G36 tape deck with a long screwdriver while it was live and all 12 valves were glowing. Hmm... I say a little prayer every time I switch on a piece of review equipment from a brand I don't know. But back to subwoofers.

If there's a problem with finding bass augmentation for either the LS3/5A or the Quad '57s, it's because they are so complete, coherent and near-perfect (within their design parameters and inherent capabilities) that integrating any subwoofer – dedicated or not – is a real challenge. The Quad ESL57, especially, is ultra-demanding because electrostatics have their own sound and cone woofers are rarely as transparent.

Again, I cannot comment on the way the massive bass drivers in the Mark Levinson HQD system synergised with the Quad ESLs, but I'm sure it was more than satisfactory. Neither have I tried the Gradiente subwoofer made specifically for Quad '57s, so I remain open to the possibility that there is a way to extend the bottom end.

Less difficult are LS3/5As, Whittle wisely designing his dedicated subwoofers around the same B110 woofer so that there will be no discontinuity in tonal balance or coherence. All that remained in designing a sub for the BBC speaker was finding the perfect crossover point and roll-off. Oh, and trusting one's ears to set the subwoofer's output at the right level.

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Launched to rave reviews, "Massive" receives high accolades and plaudits from the people that matter most – DirectStream DAC MK2 owners.

"Wow!. I think it may not improve further but if it does. . . wow!. I'm very happy with this, perhaps sonically the most significant improvement from OS ever".

"I've sometimes been amused by Paul's (McGowan) over the top plugging his products, but truly the Mk.2 (DirectStream DAC) upgrade are deserving of the praise! The sheer improvement in musicality is fabulous.

PS Audio's DirectStream DAC MK2 has a unique user-upgradable software based on hand written FPGA code. All upgrades are developed by PS Audio and are free to owners. Firmware updates are simple and take only two minutes to implement.

"Why buy a DAC with static technology, when you can own a DirectStream DAC MK2 with free upgrades to enhance your listening experience?"

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